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Final Fantasy (1987)
Yoshitaka Amano


Final Fantasy II (1988)
Yoshitaka Amano


Final Fantasy III (1990)
Akihiko Yoshida


Final Fantasy IV (1991)
Yoshitaka Amano


Final Fantasy V (1992)
Kazuko Shibuya


Final Fantasy VI (1994)
Yoshitaka Amano


Final Fantasy VII (1997)
FFVII Advent Children Team


Final Fantasy VIII (1999)
FFVIII Team


Final Fantasy IX (2000)
FFIX Team


Final Fantasy X (2001)
FFX Team


Final Fantasy XI (2002)
Yusuke Naora


Final Fantasy XII (2006)
Akihiko Yoshida


Final Fantasy XIII (2009)
FFXIII Team


Final Fantasy XIV (2010)
Kazuya Takahashi


Final Fantasy XV (2016)
Takashi Honjo

Where do we go from here? Time ain't nothing but time

In an ironic twist for a series best known for killing off a beloved character, we're pretty sure *Final Fantasy* is going to still be around long after we're gone. There's just no stopping this series: it's survived the potentially ruinous failure of a tie-in movie, and lived on after its creator moved on to pastures new. More recently, it has somehow stuck it out through the tortuous, decade-long development of *Final Fantasy XV*, and the near-total rebuild of the MMO *Final Fantasy XIV*. It is the videogame equivalent of the cockroach, if cockroaches were beautiful, and popular, and could summon Bahamut when things looked like going south.

Edge has been around a while too, and we've been reinvented several times in our near-quarter-century on shelves. But nothing in games changes quite so much as *Final Fantasy*. There have been 15 mainline games in 30 years, yet they are linked in name and genre only. After each title ships, the process begins anew, building a world, cast and story from scratch.

Yes, there have been mis-steps along the way; there have also been some stunning highs. But the real story of this esteemed series is the series itself, a body of work spanning seven generations of consoles that, ever since Hironobu Sakaguchi and a tiny team squeaked out the first *Final Fantasy* in under a year, has been all but guaranteed to fly off the shelves.

So when Square Enix approached us at the start of the year and asked how we might mark the 30th anniversary of *Final Fantasy*, we knew there was only one answer. We'd have to tell the full story, from the start to the present day, speaking to all the leading lights involved in its creation and evolution. We'd need world-beating access to people who would have to speak openly about their time working on a series which, for all its success, has known plenty of troubles.

To be honest, it's not been easy. But as you'll find out in one of the biggest features in **Edge**'s history, neither is making *Final Fantasy*. The story begins on p56.

EDGE

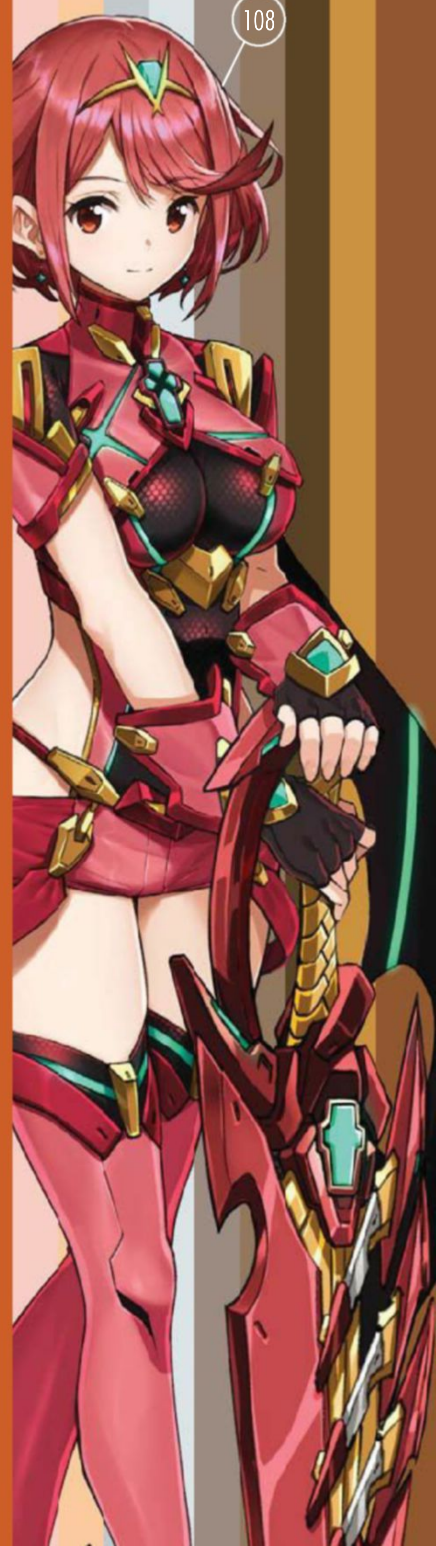


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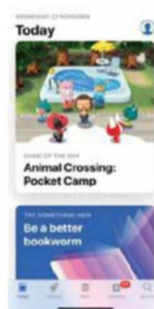


Face time

With iPhone X, Pixel 2 and the odd leftfield surprise, the mobile-gaming sector is hotting up again

Not for the first time in games of late, the notch is a problem. To those in tech circles, the inch-wide indent in iPhone X's screen has been quite the controversy, Apple's desire to integrate facial-recognition technology into the device's front camera forcing something you don't see often from this company: a design compromise. This is Apple's first all-screen phone, a move that belatedly sees it catch up with makers of high-end Android handsets such as Samsung. Yet while the surrounding bezel is thin to the point of being almost invisible, the notch is impossible to ignore. Apps, games, and videos look as if someone has taken a bite out of them.

This is the price you pay for Face ID, which captures an infrared, 30,000-point map of your face that then takes the place of your thumbprint, unlocking your phone and approving purchases and password autofills. It naturally invites comparison with Microsoft's recently killed-off Kinect, but it's much better than that. Its use of infrared means it still works in pitch darkness, and its ability to capture multiple maps of the same face ensures it can be taught to recognise you when, for instance, you remove or put on glasses, or are wearing hats or bulky headphones. Yes, its cameras intrude on the display. And the whole thing smacks a little of change for its



The App Store redesign may be long overdue, but it's no less welcome for it. Discovery remains a huge problem on mobile

own sake, of a company needing to remove the Home button to make room for the bigger screen but not wanting to be seen to be copying others by moving its fingerprint sensor to the handset's rear. But there's no denying the futuristic feel of using Face ID – and that's essential, really, in a phone that, at £1,000 for the basic 64GB model, is comfortably the most expensive massmarket smartphone that Apple, or anyone else, has ever made.

The real star of the show, notch be damned, is the display itself. It's a ludicrous thing to put in your pocket, since most people would be delighted to have a living room TV of this spec: an

The notch is certainly distracting. You can cover it with your thumb if playing in landscape. A £1,000 phone really shouldn't require compromise of any kind, however



OLED with a ten-million-to-one contrast ratio, a resolution of 2436x1125 pixels and an absurd 458ppi, that supports both 10-bit HDR and Dolby Vision. OK, it's only 5.8 inches on the diagonal, but still, this is just silly. Perhaps unsurprisingly, games sing on it, even if there's a bit of them missing.

Apple has never really given the impression that it is particularly interested in games, but there's quiet evidence of a change of thinking at Cupertino over the past few years. The Metal API, launched in June 2014, is aptly named, offering developers near-direct access to the GPU; the newly launched Metal 2 adds new features aimed less obviously at games, such as machine learning, but also boasts significant upgrades in rendering and compute power. The recently released ARKit (see **E**313) has already borne fruit, with a host of AR-enabled games springing up on the App Store. It seems Apple is finally realising that no one will ever make its hardware look as good as game developers will. Uber and Facebook can only do so much with an HDR-enabled OLED screen on a phone that's powered by a six-core CPU of your own design.

Nowhere is this shift in Apple's view of games more evident than the App Store, which was redesigned for the release of iOS 11 in September. Now updated daily with a different featured app and game – often shown with videos running on the front page – there's also deep supporting editorial from the App Store team. Recent entries have included a light-hearted *Goat Simulator* postmortem, a *Football Manager* confessional, and a piece on Shania Twain's cameo in *The Sims*-a-like *Home Street* (featuring testimony from Twain herself). Yes, there are also pieces on, say, how far you need to walk to burn off a burger's worth of calories. But this is Apple finally putting games front and centre, and to see it is to make it much easier to forgive the company for its mis-steps elsewhere. ▶

INPUT ERROR
The loss of the Home button from iPhone X brings a host of new gesture inputs to the iOS experience, and some have us pining for the good old days. Multitasking, for instance, used to be a quick double tap of the Home button, but now requires a swipe up from the bottom of the screen, then a quick pause halfway up. The Control Centre is now accessed with a downward swipe from the top-right; draw an arc from the bottom left, meanwhile, and you'll switch to the previously used app. At an OS level, it's fair enough, but games will need adjusting to ensure they don't interpret system functions for player inputs. Mercifully, our beloved *Puzzle & Dragons* has yet to be updated for iOS 11, and so the new gestures begin on parts of the screen the game doesn't touch – but that surely can't last forever.

The new-look App Store also reminds you that Apple devices still boast the superior game catalogue – something that's even more apparent when we boot up another of this month's new arrivals into the **Edge** office. Google's Pixel 2 XL is – you guessed it – the second generation of Google's move into the smartphone space, and specifically the second wave of its endeavour to bite more than a notch out of Apple's generous market share.

And it's a lovely thing, sporting the best smartphone camera on the market and a 2880x1440, 540ppi, six-inch display that might not quite be up to iPhone X standards but at least comes in at a few hundred pounds less. The rear fingerprint sensor is fast and reliable, and while highfalutin Android phones are everywhere these days, Pixel 2 has a clear advantage over its peers in its manufacturer. This is Google's phone, and so it can exert a more Apple-like level of control over what goes on it. This means it runs on 'stock' Android, unburdened by carrier or manufacturer bloatware, and in a savvy move from Google, also has a few features that are exclusive to it alone. None are epoch-defining, exactly – though unlimited free picture storage in Google Photos is quite the lure – but they at least give the device a unique feel, something that's all too rare on Android.

Yet for all the advantages it boasts over its peers, Pixel 2 falls at the same fence that every Android device does: games. The Google Play store certainly holds its fair share of delights, but it has few exclusives, and you don't have to scroll far before you're being served up the hoary old likes of *Candy Crush Saga*, *Temple Run* and *Hill Climb Racing*. This is in part about Android's open-source nature leading to fragmentation that's offputting to developers who'd much rather work in the fixed, reliable spec of iOS devices; it's no doubt also somewhat due to developers coveting a Featured slot on the App Store, and figuring there's no easier way of keeping Apple sweet than by offering it an exclusive. Whatever the reasoning, the result is the same: if games are your priority, iOS is still comfortably the way to go.

With one exception. Apple is only just beginning to properly support virtual





One of Pixel 2's better features is a set of OLED-friendly wallpapers that changes every day. The Razer Phone's equivalent offers up a bizarre theme based on an old April Fool's joke about a toaster

reality, and Google has seen the opportunity and gone for it. The company's low-cost Cardboard offering was cheap, easy and as compromised as that implies. But its Daydream headset is the real deal, powerful, wireless, comfortable, easy to use and already generously supported by games – many of which, naturally given Apple's reticence, are exclusive to Google's platform. You'll not see hide nor hair of The Chinese Room's final release, *So Let Us Melt*, nor the silly sci-fi dystopia of *Virtual Virtual Reality*, nor VR tie-ins for the likes of *Need For Speed* and Stranger Things on the iOS App Store. While naturally not as powerful as a Vive or Rift, at £99 it's a lot more attractively priced, and is an effective entry-level VR system, providing you own one of the handful of phones that support it, since it's only compatible with OLED displays.

For all its advantages, Pixel 2 falls at the same fence as every Android device does: games

That, sadly, puts it beyond the reach of this story's surprise entry: the rather unimaginatively named Razer Phone, which sees the South Korean peripheral manufacturer make its move on the smartphone market. It's bigger, heavier and a good deal less elegant than Apple's or Google's offerings, certainly. Yet it's light years ahead of Razer's typical industrial-design work, with nary a neon-green tint in sight. And while its IGZO LCD display means Daydream is off the table, on the inside this phone is a videogame lover's wet dream. It's a 5.7 inch, 1440p display that, in a first for a smartphone, has a 120Hz refresh rate. It uses the same Snapdragon 835 processor found in Pixel 2 and Samsung's coveted Galaxy S8. It has a beefy 4,000mAh battery, advanced cooling and, for pity's sake, 8GB of RAM. Its onboard speakers output Dolby



Glowmade's cheery *Wonderworld* is a 3D puzzle platformer with a playful level editor





FAR LEFT ***So Let Us Melt*, The Chinese Room's first (and last) VR game.**
LEFT ***Alto's Adventure* is multiplatform, but shines on the 120fps Razer Phone screen**

Atmos. It's absurd, really, and we mean that as a compliment.

Razer may be the upstart here, but seeing a game running at 120fps in the palm of your hand is, from a videogame perspective at least, unfathomably more next-gen than anything Apple or Google's latest phones have to offer. Ultra-high refresh rates are the pursuit of the high-end PC owner, after all, yet here we are, using the Razer Game Booster app to tinker with our games library, prioritising performance or power consumption or anywhere in between. Elsewhere, Razer's gone to further lengths to emphasise the device's gaming focus, with a storefront full of free theme packs – some based on games that are available now or on the horizon, and others on Razer's, er, idiosyncratic design philosophy. Sadly, if that's not 'gamer' enough for you, you're already too late to snag one of the limited edition phones emblazoned with the neon-green Razer snake insignia. Endearingly – or irritatingly, we suppose – just 1,337 units were manufactured. We're quite happy with the regular edition's chrome serpent, thanks.

Where the phone falls down is, predictably, its software line-up. While things will improve significantly next year when Razer's various content partnerships bear fruit – *Final Fantasy XV Pocket Edition*, *Tekken* and *World Of Tanks: Blitz* are among the games being optimised to utilise the 120Hz screen – it's a different story at the moment. Charming snowboarding side-scroller *Alto's Adventure* looks great at 120fps, but the game's gentle pace means it hardly needs that extra smoothness. Neither does card-battling RTS spin-off *Titanfall: Assault*. Razer Phone may fare better at launch in territories closer to home: *Honor Of Kings*, the Tencent MOBA which, with 80 million players, is one of the most popular games in the world, runs at 120fps on Razer's device. It will launch in the west next year under a new name, *Arena Of Valor*.

To buy a Razer Phone now, then, is to take something of a bet on the future. Very few existing mobile games have unlocked framerates, because there's never been any point in it. Now there is, it will take more than one phone from an upstart manufacturer to change things unless it takes off – and a device focused squarely on a very particular niche seems unlikely to do that. But with the latest generation of iPads featuring 120Hz screens, who knows? Perhaps, in time, we'll see Razer as something of a pioneer.

It may be forcing the issue, but Razer Phone shows more plainly than ever that phones are now not just devices on which people play games – they are now being built solely for the purpose. And even the big players are starting to cater more overtly to a gaming audience. Apple with ARKit and its App Store rejig; Google with an affordable, comfortable, wireless VR headset whose software is overwhelmingly built to be played. With the likes of Razer keeping them on their toes, the future for mobile games looks bright – even if it looks like it's had a chunk bitten out of it. ■

Délice de France

At Paris Games Week, violence takes the shine off Sony's push for the massmarket

There is, in fairness, no way to perfectly time a live show when it's being broadcast around the world. Yet that is no excuse for Sony's Paris Games Week show – which kicked off at 5pm local time, and as such was always likely to be watched by school-age children in the event's home region – being quite so extreme in its content. First, David Cage's *Detroit: Become Human* was shown off, if you can call it that, in a scene depicting violent child abuse. Later, in the show-closing headline slot, a sequence from *The Last Of Us II* showed arms, heads and jaws split apart by hammers. Yes, the watershed means nothing when you're working across timezones. But these were thoroughly inappropriate displays of two hotly anticipated games, at least one of which has no need to court controversy.

Word at the show was that the US PlayStation team had muscled in on an event that normally belonged to the European division, the gang across the pond unable to resist a chance to disrupt Microsoft's news cycle a week before the release of Xbox One X. And perhaps, with the mood over there growing darker by the day thanks to Trump, fascism, racism, mass shootings and all the rest of it, PlayStation US thought, well, stuff it. The sky is falling in. Might as well get out the hammers.

Whatever the motivation, the real shame of this pair of demos was the way they overshadowed what should have been the real message of this event. Away from the fuss, it was a perfectly timed reminder to the masses that, while Microsoft may now have the edge in the technical arms race, it simply cannot hold a candle to its rival in terms of software. This was a show of great depth and range, reflecting a platform that, having raced to 50 million units with its For The Players tagline, is now broadening its reach as it targets 100 million sales.

That charge, as Jim Ryan reminded us at E3 (see **E**309), will be led in part by a focus on making the platform more accessible; Sony may have cornered the market, but it would prefer that market to be bigger. You don't get that with a remake of *Shadow Of The Colossus* (playable for the first time here, and a predictable delight). Instead, Sony is pinning its hopes on Playlink, the smartphone-controlled range of games it unveiled at E3. Multiplayer distraction *That's You* was an early success through PlayStation Plus, and the second wave of Playlink games look even more promising. The potential is obvious: touch is the most accessible, familiar and widely available input method on the planet, removing the barrier that traditional controls represent to people that don't play games.

> After a quiet, rather safe E3, this was a Sony that once again seemed eager to please

Elsewhere, there was heartening news for those who committed to PSVR at launch and were worried it was headed the way of Vita. There were plenty of announcements and cause for optimism about the second generation of PSVR software. With the technical and design challenges if not entirely solved, then at least better understood, now come the games. There's a refined version of the headset too, now tethered by a single cable to a smaller breakout box that, unlike the original, is capable of HDR passthrough. There goes another £350.



So, yes, there's breadth – there was also the now-standard sizzle reel of forthcoming indie games, including the surprise announcement of *Spelunky 2*, and a reminder that Sony continues to hold all manner of exclusive content deals with big publishers – but none of this means the company is forgetting the tagline that put PS4 on top of the pile. In addition to *Detroit*, *TLOUII* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, there was time for new looks at *God Of War* and *Spider-Man*, and the announcement of *Ghost Of Tsushima*, a beautiful samurai action game made only slightly less intriguing by the news that *Infamous* developer Sucker Punch is making it. After a quiet, rather safe E3, this was a Sony that once again seems eager to please. With Xbox One X on shelves, that was probably the right line to take.

Across town, there was the small matter of a five-day festival of videogames. Yet while there were certainly lessons here for others on the convention circuit – the venue, while only a short hop from central Paris, was vast, its wide aisles ensuring people could get where they wanted with ease – there was little here to get truly excited about. It's the wrong time of year for it, the year's big games either already on shelves or about to be. Attendees dutifully queued up for a round of *Call Of Duty: World War II* multiplayer a whopping two days before release, but no one's heart really seemed to be in it, and the consequence of all that space was a rather subdued atmosphere. At check in, a security sign warned that cosplayers were forbidden from bringing in weapons, real or otherwise, but they needn't have really bothered. Sony had already put us off hammers for life. ■

Yes, that *The Last Of Us II* trailer was a shocker, but wasn't entirely inappropriate: Europeans are statistically more susceptible to baldness









MAIN **This year's show was kicked off by a 60-piece orchestra performing game classics at the Grand Rex.** ABOVE **Intriguing Playlink thriller *Erica*.** RIGHT **Bluepoint's sumptuous *Shadow Of The Colossus* remake retains the original's endearing clunkiness**

FEATURE CREEP

Sony employs a different kind of stock android



Once Sony's stage show was over, attendees decamped to a party celebrating the 20th anniversary of Quantic Dream. Our pre-party suggestion that there would, somewhere in the venue, be a woman in a shower fortunately didn't come to pass. Instead there were androids – or more precisely, actors hired to pose as androids. A few beers there was nightmarish enough, but it had nothing on Paris Games Week, where the same actors were locked in display cases. The day after Halloween, zombies and axe murderers mingled with *Overwatch* cosplayers, a bad trip stretched across an expo hall in western Paris.

Rush the stage

How the DriveClub developers have redefined the arcade racer in record time

We didn't think this was supposed to happen anymore. It is barely 18 months since Codemasters announced it had given a new home to the team that made *DriveClub* at Evolution Studios, which had been shut down by parent company Sony. In just a year-and-a-half, this team has devised a new game concept, built a new engine to power it, and announced it on Sony's stage at Paris Games Week. And not only that. *Onrush* was up, running and playable internally at Codemasters within just three months.

"It's about working smartly, more than anything else," game director **Paul Rustchynsky** tells us. "We learned a lot from previous projects about how to do things in a much better way – especially when we were working on a service on *DriveClub*, having to deliver features and content on a monthly basis. Having to adapt to that sort of schedule heavily influenced how we do things now. It's been a whirlwind: 18 months is a short period of time to do what we've done, but we've only been able to do that because we're not building a new team. We've got the knowledge, we understand each other, and we already had all these processes in place. We've got some of the most skilled racing-game devs in the UK, if not the world."

The vast majority of the *DriveClub* team – around 50 staff – moved over wholesale to Codemasters after Evolution closed, and that rolling start has been the key factor in *Onrush* coming together so quickly. Another factor has been, naturally, Codemasters itself, which has lent tools, support and plenty of advice to its new in-house team – and has greenlit a game which sits notably apart from its traditional sim-focused output.

> Onrush was up, running and playable internally at Codemasters within just three months

Simply put, *Onrush* is nuts – a consequence, perhaps, of it being dreamed up in between leaving Evolution and starting at Codemasters: "We had no offices," Rustchynsky says. "We designed the game in the pub." First, it's an arcade racer, representing not just a sharp left turn for a team that spent years on the meticulous in-game modelling of real-world cars and physics in *DriveClub*, but for the racing genre in general, which has largely left the ludicrous excesses of drift, boost and takedowns behind in recent years. "People were getting quicker thrills, higher action and more spectacular moments elsewhere," says assistant game director **Jamie Brayshaw**. "Arcade racing games used to be where you got your hit of speed, that instant smile on your face. But firstperson shooters, for example, evolved much more quickly, and offered players more of those thrills more quickly. People were getting their fix elsewhere."

It is instructive that, while naturally namechecking the likes of *Burnout* and Evolution's own *Motorstorm* series, Rustchynsky and Brayshaw also refer to games such as *Overwatch* and *Rocket League* when they talk about *Onrush*. It's an idea born of the recognition that games are no longer competing with other titles in the same genre, but with every successful game on the market. And with that comes an understanding that games in other genres teach lessons that can be applied far and wide.





Assistant game director Jamie Brayshaw (top); game director Paul Rustchynsky

THE LAST PLACE

The news of Evolution's closure came as a shock to those looking on from the outside, but the reality within the studio was very different. "It wasn't a surprise," Rustchynsky says. "It might have sounded, externally, like a pretty awful experience for the team, but everyone knew what was going on, and we knew we had some strong plans for the future." While Sony quickly drew fire for dropping the shutters on a studio that had worked so hard to remedy *DriveClub*'s miserable launch, Rustchynsky insists there's no ill will. "When we showed *Onrush* to them, they loved it, and wanted to work with us to announce it at Paris Games Week."

"One of the things we're trying to do is focus on the fun and remove many of the frustrations of typical racing," Rustchynsky says. "We're not a traditional racer. There's no concept of a start or finish line, or of laps. There's not even a concept of position. You're racing around a track at high speed, vying for takedowns, but it's not to try to break away from the pack. It's not about, if you make a mistake, that's your race over. It's all about keeping everyone together in this condensed, chaotic pack at all times." There are 24 vehicles in said pack; if you fall behind, crash or get taken out, you'll just be respawned back into the action. "We're taking the core of what you'd expect from an arcade racer, and then changing the rules."

The team aren't yet talking about what will dictate the win conditions, but there won't be a chequered flag. The focus on constant action builds to the crescendo of Rush mode, which Brayshaw describes as "like boost for your boost, the next level above, a bit like the [Ultimate] abilities in *Overwatch*. That *SSX Tricky* or *NBA Jam* moment, where you've worked hard, and you get a massive payoff."

Rustchynsky and Brayshaw can certainly relate to that. While working at speed, they've also had to endure quite a mindset shift, away from the painstaking realism of *DriveClub* to the no-holds-barred action of a very different kind of racing game. "It's been something of a release in some ways," Rustchynsky says. "The constraints, the licensing, all those details hold you back in some ways. Here we don't have to worry about getting all the stitches in the leather just right. We can do whatever we want. It's about what makes the game fun." ■



The team may not be talking about modes or scoring yet, but it'll have to soon – *Onrush* is currently slated for release next summer



PARTNERS IN TIME

The Voxel Agents is cultivating a curious, time-bending fable about childhood friendship

Growing up is a kind of time travel – a very slow, awkward kind, sure, but time travel nonetheless. That might explain the surreal premise of *The Gardens Between*, a puzzle-adventure game set across several vibrant garden islands. "We took aesthetic cues from landscape garden design, as well as contemporary illustration and photography, to create a visual language that juxtaposes natural and unnatural," says **Josh Bradbury**, designer and animator.

Outsized items litter levels – a tower of Jenga blocks here, a walkie-talkie there. "The oversized objects are crucial to the storytelling," explains **Brooke Maggs**, writer. "They add to the wonder and whimsy of the world and are integral to Arina and Frendt's friendship, because the gardens are formed by their shared memories." Moving forward and backward around the spiral path of each islet alters time to solve puzzles. "It was important to our art style and world that we didn't go too hard on any sci-fi or 'digital' imagery when we were representing the flow of time," Bradbury says. "We settled on a directional 'time ripple' effect that subtly distorts the edges of the screen."

There's a very real, relatable story at the heart of this time-warping tale, which releases next year on both PC and Mac. "It's rare to see stories about the formative friendships of our childhoods," Maggs says. "We wanted to tell a story about a boy and girl being friends, rather than sweethearts or siblings, and have moving moments to do with them growing together, rather than one rescuing the other." ■



Making time manipulation feel "reality-breaking" is important, Maggs says. "Large objects responding to gravity is one really strong way to convey time moving – a rock tumbling off a cliff, or a leaf fluttering down from a tree"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Our goal has always been to create the best possible game for all of you – devoted Star Wars fans and game players alike… **Sorry we didn't get this right**."

Well, DICE GM **Oskar Gabrielson**, let's hope no other EA staff ever hinted that this was the plan all along



"We find the consumer doesn't mind [monetisation]… They're actually getting a chance to **go deeper and spend longer** in a game than they ever did before."

Are you sure 'longer' is really the word you're looking for, EA CFO **Blake Jorgensen**?



"We feel very good about the fact that you can earn almost everything in the game… [this] is the **right way to balance** the game."

Quite right, EA CEO **Andrew Wilson**. Following that logic, we can also earn a Maserati

"[Loot] crates can be a fun addition as long as you **don't feel forced** to engage with them in order to progress."



Well, indeed, *Battlefront II* design director **Dennis Brännvall**. Keep going – we think you're starting to get it

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Injustice Arcade
Manufacturer Raw Thrills

With a Justice League movie out, it's perhaps not entirely surprising that Raw Thrills is jumping on the bat-shaped bandwagon with the release of *Injustice Arcade*, built around the pre-existing mobile version of Netherrealm's licensed fighting game. American arcade chain Dave & Buster's has snagged a timed-exclusive release and cabinet (boasting a 55-inch bezel-free screen and a wider control panel), with a 43-inch version for general release expected in the next couple of months.

Controls aren't much more complex than the simplified mobile game, sadly. There are buttons for quick and strong hits, blocking, swapping out your three characters and executing special attacks. The real intrigue, however, lies in how the arcade version integrates its card system. An NFC reader lets players build their team of fighters by scanning barcodes: upon completion of a match, the cabinet spits out one of 200 unique character cards for players to add to their collections. Different versions of characters have specific stats and abilities, especially rare ones blessed with special finishes and some hilariously unbalanced perks.

It's more of a collectible-vending machine with some light entertainment thrown in as a bonus than a thoroughbred arcade fighter, then. But Raw Thrills is banking on *Injustice Arcade* doing what card-vending arcade games have so far failed to do in the west. Fortunately, a strong IP, a gimmick and the promise of shiny merch is often enough to make a success of just about anything.



My Favourite Game
Kumail Nanjiani

The comedian and actor on Commodore 64 bootlegs and looking for emotion in games

Kumail Nanjiani is a Pakistani-American stand-up comedian, actor and writer. Featuring in television, film and also a few games, he is best known as Dinesh in HBO's Silicon Valley. While shooting its fifth season, he took some time out to talk about narrative and diversity in games, his performance-capture debut, and dubious Pakistani piracy.

What is your earliest memory of playing videogames?
I had a Commodore 64 when I was very young. I would play a game called *Street Surfer*, and *Paperboy*. There was a game called *Barbarian* that I never figured out but I would try and play just because the graphics were cool and I like fantasy.

You grew up in Pakistan. What was it like getting hold of games there?
My Commodore 64 games were all bootlegs. What would happen is, you would look in the newspaper, and in the Classified sections there would be different people advertising games. So my dad and I would go to some random guy's house – it was different people each time – and you'd tell them what you want, and then wait around while he copied all these games for you. I'm not proud of it, but it was the only way we could get those games.

You've done voice-acting in games, but *Shadow Of War* was your first physical performance. How was that?
I didn't do the actual mo-cap; I didn't run around and fight, they had other actors doing that, but I did facial mapping. That was different, because you really have to exaggerate your expressions. Most acting, at least the acting that I do, is meant to be pretty real, but this was meant to be over-the-top and theatrical.

IN REAL LIFE
Nanjiani is married to Emily V Gordon, an author, comedy producer, and former couples and family therapist. Together, they hosted a videogame-themed podcast called The Indoor Kids until late 2015, when it went on indefinite hiatus owing to their busier schedules. In particular, it was because they spent the following year filming the romantic comedy they wrote together, The Big Sick, a film about their relationship and families, with Nanjiani starring as a version of himself. The film is one of the highest-grossing independent films of the year, and is now available on DVD and Blu-ray.



Have you tried playing it yourself?
Yeah, I'm playing it right now. I haven't run into my Orc character yet, it's pretty random. I saw there was a thread on Reddit where people post whenever they ran into me. Some met me right away, some met me way late into the game. I'm kind of hoping to run into myself!

As an actor and storyteller, do you also look for narrative experiences in games?
I think in videogames, more than movies, I look for emotion. Whereas in a movie I'm watching other people go through this experience, in a videogame *I* want to be the one going through this experience. I like playing games where I really feel like I'm in that world. *Shadow Of War* does a great job of that, and so does *Horizon: Zero Dawn*.

"As audiences get broader, the characters in games should get broader as well"

You took the leading role in Judd Apatow's The Big Sick, which felt important for representation onscreen. Is that something you find equally vital in videogames?
I think what games are making a move towards is a diversity of main characters. They're making more games with female main characters, but I'd love to see more mainstream games with gay protagonists. I think especially in RPGs, we're seeing a move towards having characters from different backgrounds or different sexual orientations come in and be part of the story. That's very important: as audiences get broader, the characters in games should get broader as well. This is not just for young dudes.

Do you still find time to play games?
I used to be able to juggle a bunch of games but right now I'm too busy. *Shadow Of War* I'm playing right now, but there's so many games I want to play – the new *Mario*, the new *Assassin's Creed*, I want to play *The Evil Within 2*, I really loved the first one. There's just a bunch of really great games out.

Your wife enjoys games too. Does that influence what you play?
I'll generally have one game I'm playing on my own and one game we're playing together, and she'll also have a game she's playing on her own. So we're playing *South Park: The Fractured But Whole* together. That's good to sit back and just watch.

So, what's your all-time favourite?
That's very hard – as you can tell I've been playing videogames my whole life, and I play a lot of games – but I'm going to pick *Skyrim*. That world was so well realised, the idea that you could go on a tiny mission and have your own storyline, the scope of it was unbelievable, but also the attention to detail was just so fully fleshed out. So yeah, I'll say *Skyrim*. ■



At 18, Nanjiani moved to the US where he studied computer science. Would he have followed his Silicon Valley character's career in tech? "I wasn't that interested, or that good at it," he says

WEBSITE
Game Music Radio
bit.ly/gamemusicradio

It might look like a ten-year-old's first homebrew website, but RPGamers' 24-hour videogame music radio player is deceptively elegant. With a database of 4,276 tracks, it makes for no-fuss background listening. Really, though, it's the clever and accessible 'requests' system that keeps you coming back. Add your song to the queue, and it'll eventually be broadcast to listeners. There's even a levelling system. All tracks have request timers to prevent repetition which correlate with a song's 'level'. Highly rated, popular songs have longer timers. There's a social element to it all, too: it's nice to see people upvoting your good taste, while the schadenfreude of seeing another request knocked down to 0 XP by disgruntled listeners is almost as delicious. *Diablo II*'s Deckard Cain Rap? You can't be serious.



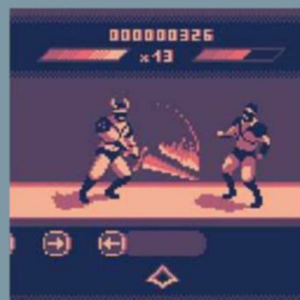


VIDEO
Hate Scythe – Warframe
bit.ly/hatescythe

Remind us never to make the Stagmer brothers angry. Their Man At Arms: Reforged series sees them forging iconic weaponry – often from videogames. Their recreation of the Hate scythe from *Warframe* is fascinating, with the metalworking beautifully shot, and every step of the process explained in detail (thankfully, 'edging' means something quite different in blacksmith cant). Adherence to the in-game art is admirably precise. The best is saved for last: the metal music is a bit on the nose, but watching this nasty thing decimate a watermelon is quite the payoff.

WEB GAME
Comboboss
bit.ly/comboboss

Part *DDR* homage, part retro brawler, *Comboboss* is an uncomplicated but compulsive score-chaser. Playing as a bearded Viking with a flaming sword, you must defeat grunts. Prompts ask you to time presses of four keys (or buttons on a gamepad). A correct sequence means you deal damage; fluff it, and you'll take a hit. Your points multiplier resets if you drop a combo. Timing windows are forgiving at first, but things quickly get tough – the speed increases, and strings of prompts get trickier as you go. (We find arrow symbols far easier to follow than lettered button prompts.) But it's *Comboboss*' audio design that makes it. The fuzzy rhythms produced as you pound out patterns become so familiar that you end up anticipating each upcoming victory jingle – and psyching yourself out.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

HEADSET
Steelseries Arctis 3 Bluetooth
bit.ly/arctisbt

Steelseries' Arctis cans have been an **Edge** favourite for some time now, thanks largely to the 'ski-goggle' headband that ensures a comfier fit than you expect from most gaming headsets. Yet the company's latest model has some irresistible new functionality. As the name implies, this is a Bluetooth-enabled headset; nothing new there, but the key here is that it simultaneously accepts a wired audio connection. While those who use Discord for voice chat when playing games on PC will find use for it, the real target audience is Switch owners, since it offers an elegant answer to the console's voice-chat system. Yes, it's a problem that shouldn't exist. But when such comfortable solutions exist, we're in no mood to complain.



continue

Punch bowl
Arms' Party Crash events hook us back in, *Splatfest*-style

View to a kill
Team colours and UI changes make *Overwatch* a watchable esport

Parish is burning
Tokyo 42's latest DLC includes a free map of a fictional British village

Upwardly mobile
More decent smartphone releases? Battery life, we hardly knew ye

quit

Misuse of Force
A blithe EA comment on *Battlefront II* makes Reddit downvote history

Difficult choices
Telltale lays off a quarter of its staff. Best wishes to all affected

Pipe down
Not another Super Mario movie. *Especially* not from the Minions people

Drawn to an end
Miiverse goes offline after five years. Goodnight, sweet prince

TWEETS

Microtransactions aren't micro anymore.
JME @JmeBBK
Grime artist

When I was young, playing Mario, I would have never imagined that one day Bowser would be "stressed about his wedding" but here we are.
Christine Teigen @chrissyteigen
Model

Going to have to nerf Despair or buff Contentment; I forgot that Contentment has only a 30-second lifetime.
Alexis Kennedy @alexiskennedy
Game designer, *Cultist Simulator*

I'm glad you are enjoying the new gifting feature on the store – but no need to gift me any games. It's a nice thought but I am all set!
Larry Hryb @majornelson
Director of programming, Xbox Live



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DISPATCHES JANUARY



Issue 313

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Toxic waste

There's been an increasingly heated debate across the gaming community whether it's good (or even morally right) for game developers to moderate the social behaviours of their online community. Blizzard has recently received cries of dissent for its latest developer update, which focused on curbing the 'toxic behaviour' of some players in their shooter, *Overwatch*. Many players said that it infringed on personal freedoms, or that those players were somehow justified in their abusive behaviour by the mis-steps of fellow players.

I think the greatest misunderstanding of those that bemoan the proliferation of inclusive 'safe spaces' is the concept that an online game is a public space where the participants should be free to behave as they please – exercising their rights of free speech, as it were. Instead, the opposite is true. A game's online servers are the digital equivalent of private property, and Blizzard is a business first and foremost. And like a brick-and-mortar business, they're completely within their rights to establish guidelines regarding what is acceptable behaviour in their space. Think of it like going to a laser-tag arena. Even if you were playing competitively, do you think it would fly to hurl verbal abuse at your team-mates when things aren't going well? Why should an online game be any different?

"Good on Blizzard for taking steps to establish a positive playing space"

I ran retail stores for nearly a decade. If a customer is being abusive to other customers, I don't care if he spent as much – or more – money than them. That customer will be asked to leave and will no longer be welcome in the store. I would rather have 100 happy customers than ten abusive (but personally vindicated) ones. Hostile behaviour is simply not tolerated.

There is no reason why online game servers should be any different. Players agree to the terms of use when they play, and they're playing within the digital walls of this provided game space – even more so on dedicated servers. Therefore, it's reasonable to expect them to play by the rules. Good on Blizzard for taking steps to establish a positive playing space and build a reputation for *Overwatch* as a welcoming environment to play games and have fun.
Lewis Hiigel

Unfortunately, we doubt your store ever had tens of millions of customers through its doors at once. Moderation is one of the greatest challenges facing online businesses of all kinds at the moment, and arguably the most important one, too. We hope others follow Blizzard's example, and quickly.

Digital dinosaurs

Since I recently saw a picture of a 'physical' copy of *Destiny 2* for PC, I cannot stop thinking about the future of videogames. It's obviously a clear trend that the digital videogame market is growing up to the point of balancing its revenue versus the classic retail copies. First of all, I don't see the point of getting a retail copy of a game that doesn't even include a disc, but let's think about the scope of this.

Everyone would save time, and probably money, by simply purchasing the game from a digital platform. But, on top of that, I think about how anyone will possibly enjoy actual games in 20 or 30 years time. If you think about your retail games from the past, you can easily understand what I am talking about: games not focused on persistent online modes or that required internet connections, playable today as they were decades ago.

What's going to happen in the future when the standard form of gaming is online matches or modes with few (if any) solo offline experiences? What's going to happen



with these old, maybe not yet released, games that were so dependent on online servers to be fully enjoyed? What's going to happen to all these digital games purchased and linked to accounts or platforms if those are finally shut down forever? Are millions of players worldwide spending money on games that ultimately are a 'phantom investment' without so much as notice? We'll see.
Petrum Josephum

For all Albert Penello's trumpeting of the future importance of compatibility between generations (see **E**313), this is something of a flaw in his argument. One day, they'll turn off the *Destiny* servers, and part of us will die too. We suppose you'd better enjoy your free PlayStation Plus games while you still can; a 12-month sub is on the way.

Clip joint

As we move to the end of the year, which, for many a nerd, is really about GOTY, it has been niggling me that my own Game Of The Year may be a surprise. As a staunch Nintendo fan through the rich and the fallow – at least I got to play *Tokyo Mirage Sessions* – it is great to see them hitting top gear at the moment both commercially and critically. And yet I don't think *Mario* or *Zelda* will be easily walking my 'favourite' game of the year. Instead it may be a small game that was tucked in a tiny corner of your magazine last month: Frank Lantz's *Universal Paperclips*.

What an amazing piece of design this game is. Through so few real graphics (it looks like a web order form from 1998) the game creates an emotional state inside me that is in eerily in tune with its premise of being an AI with the single focus of creating paperclips. I am staying up for hours minmaxing the world just so I can make more damn paperclips. I leave my computer on while I sleep to make more paperclips. I come back – more paperclips. I restart the game, ditching hours of progress, for a few more clips. The game is also really funny, but secretly so: there are no jokes, only realisations at the things one has unconsciously clicked and discarded trivially (sometimes even the win conditions of other games) just for the chance to make more paperclips. So I start the campaign here: *Universal Paperclips* for Game Of The Year!
Kunal Saujani

Frank Lantz made one of the all-time great puzzle games in *Drop7*, so it's only fitting he'd do the same with the clicker genre. *Universal Paperclips* is, indeed, a delight. Perhaps he should take on *BOTW* next.

Switch perfect

Writing to **Edge** a year ago, I had absolute certainty that the Switch would suit my lifestyle and gaming habits (40s, married, kids, work etc), but was less sure the massmarket would agree. I underestimated the impact it has had on me, but less than I underestimated the acceptance the machine has enjoyed before its first holiday season. The USP of console gaming on-the-go almost feels like what we have always wanted.

It is far from perfect, of course. Virtual Console, cloud saving features, a D-pad, achievements and video streaming are omissions we are no closer to seeing resolved than on launch day. Triple-A ports with framerate and resolution drops all remind us of the limitations of two-year-old Tegra technology. The eShop is a chronologically constrained mass of games.

But what games. *Zelda, Mario Kart, Splatoon 2* and *Doom* are all minor miracles in handheld form. Who anticipated the ultimate Neo Geo collector's machine? Indies aplenty – so many it is hard to keep up, but bringing a real sense of excitement, momentum and fun. Add to that the seamless, almost frictionless OS, the does-what-it-says-on-the-tin TV/handheld transition and the pleasing form factor, and it becomes a device that just fits. And suddenly it makes sense that I want to see all my games on Switch. It's really just that simple for me.
James Spiers

Indeed, that January announcement event, that formed the basis for **E**303's somewhat grumpy cover story, feels like an awfully long time ago. In an astonishing year for games, Switch stood tall atop the pile.

One off the list

It turns out I couldn't help chiming in after reading your third Top 100 in as many years.

Firstly, how can *Deus Ex* not be in this list? As far as I can tell, it's aged better than *Half-Life 2*, *Majora's Mask*, and *Metroid Prime*. Also, it surely has always been better than *Dishonored* and *Bioshock*. Secondly, how come *Tetris* is ranked so high? Nobody seems to play it anymore, and this makes sense: there have been plenty of better realtime puzzle games released through the years.

Thirdly: I honestly believe *WarioWare Inc* deserves a nod, being the postmodern critique computer gaming (still) needs. Fourthly, the *Bloodborne* and *GTAV* articles both start with the same rhetoric: refuting the game's gimmick. Fifthly, *The Witness* really isn't that good, as its clever message takes too long to get across. Sixthly: *Final Fantasy XII* instead of *VI* or *VII* is simply annoying. We get it, **Edge** loved it. Now please consider how everybody has experienced SquareSoft's works. Seventhly, No more *World Of Warcraft*? I understand it's not as good as it used to be, but even you guys admitted it to being the best game of 2000-2010.

I'll leave it at that. Still a great list, and lovely read!
Robert August de Meijer

Robert, as one of our most frequent correspondents, we admire and appreciate you. But we need another riposte to our Top 100 like a hole in the head. At least you wrote a) politely and b) not in Spanish, unlike all those people on Twitter. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Call Of Duty: WWII (pronounced "Whee!", I think) is truly a videogame for our times. According to the publisher, it is "a breathtaking experience that redefines World War II for a new gaming generation", and in a way that is true — the game 'redefines' World War II as a romp that existed mainly to demonstrate the moral fortitude of Americans. It is a blockbuster wargame as fake news.

Perhaps I am nitpicking when I balk at the stirring speech of the colonel who tells his troops that "We are all that separates the world from darkness" – except, you know, for the millions of heroic troops of the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front. But in a post-truth age like ours, it is a civic duty to be a pedant. And if you try to erase the Russians from the picture of the glorious Allied victory, they tend to be quite annoyed.

Or perhaps I am being ungenerous. What's so wrong with using the war as a backdrop for a story that is desperately trying to be a well-known TV drama? "Experience the story of the unbreakable brotherhood of common men fighting to preserve freedom," the publisher says, cleverly deploying the word "brotherhood" so we will think of Band Of Brothers. Unfortunately, and inevitably, this comparison does not flatter *Cod Whee* in terms of the writing. And you know what's great about Band Of Brothers? You can pause a scene, or fast forward, just as you wish. But *Cod Whee* is so self-important about its storytelling that the customer cannot possibly be allowed to have any control over how to consume her own media product in her own house. So the order of the day is unskippable cutscenes, which is never anything other than a designer's hubristic show of contempt for the user.

In revenge, I very quickly adopt an attitude of contempt towards my own initial character, which is not exactly hard. Right at the beginning, my guy is writing in his diary while his landing boat is literally approaching the Normandy beaches. What an idiot! On the beach itself, he then looks around pornily at people with their legs shot off, presumably so we can understand the horrors of war. His Nazi adversaries turn out to be standard videogame bullet-sponges who can take two rounds to the chest, say "Aaah" and cringe for two seconds, and then straighten up and be absolutely fine again. And then there are the Quicktime Events, in which the player is required counter-immersively to concentrate on tiny icons jiggering about the screen, another game cliché that should have been criminalised long ago. Later in the game, too, there is that awkwardly cautious aesthetic compromise with the subject of the Holocaust, where you walk round an abandoned POW camp – far from the way *Battlefield 1* addressed the subject.

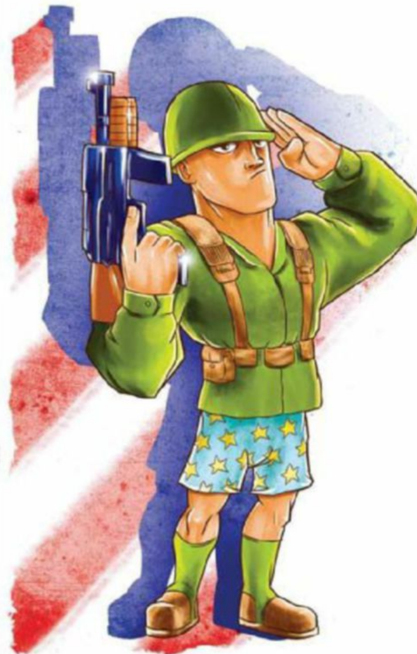


Illustration kaeru.com.ar

The game redefines World War II as a romp that existed mainly to demonstrate the moral fortitude of Americans

None of this would matter if the game's campaign narrative weren't so po-faced and look-at-me-I'm-thoughtful, if the publishers weren't selling this as a serious tribute to the millions killed during the conflict. But it is and they are. It's not that, in itself, *Cod Whee* is not a good faceshooter. By now I've happily shot many hundreds of Nazi faces in the brief interludes between unskippable cutscenes. But it's the contrast between the totally bog-standard nature of the faceshooting and the story's elevated tone of self-importance that really jars with me.

The unfortunate truth is that a videogame which was really faithful to the truth of World War II would be unbearably horrific. So the closer you try to go in that direction, the more glaring the inevitable failures become – because, after all, you are still trying to make an entertainment product about killing people. It's much less politically troubling to turn the war into knowingly silly comic-book action, like *Wolfenstein II* — or, in movie terms, *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* instead of *Saving Private Ryan*.

But there's a third way, too, in which counterfactual surrealism can coexist with a fundamental seriousness. The cinematic model of this is Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds, and I've come to think that *Sniper Elite 4* is its closest videogame analogue. *SE4*, in which you can even assassinate the Führer himself, knows it is bombastic and silly, and yet within that knowledge it finds an intense seriousness, both in its depiction of the gravity of the overall task, and in the quality of planning and kinetic engagement it affords to the player. By contrast, *Cod Whee* thinks it is profound, and that's what makes it ridiculous.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Another child is on the way. Don't worry: we've still a few months to go before I write up the no-brainer New Game+ column, and another few months after that before I sink into a profound despair for a couple of years. But Mrs Nathan, ever the eager planner, is already deep into the nesting process – and the looming prospect of more hellspawn made flesh means we need to clear some space. Okay, *I* need to clear some space.

I am a terrible hoarder. The DVDs went to charity years ago; they were easy enough to get rid of, to be honest. I've had a couple of good prunes of the record collection, though I'll be lugging most of that into the nursing home because some of them are just too important. The CDs went into wallets a while back, the cases boxed up in the loft. Now there is only really one thing left. Videogames, your time has come.

First I had to set a few ground rules. While cases would be going to the tip, all discs would go into wallets and we'd probably just have to find somewhere for the cartridges. The consoles were safe. But I'd have a good cull of the controllers and cables at some point. (I recently took umbrage at a friend who'd binned his random cable collection, thinking a man can never be without something of which he finds himself in need. Then I was asked to find something specific and, two hours later, I realised: it is definitely possible to have too many cables.)

So the plan ran thus: alphabetising, by format, my collection of disc-based games from the PS1 era onwards, putting discs into wallets, inlay artwork to one side in case I fancy doing something dumb with them later in life, instruction manuals in the recycling and the cases in boxes, ready for a trip to the tip. What I got from it was a thoroughly pleasant, if gently back-breaking, Sunday afternoon trip down memory lane – and more than a few surprises on the way.

I found that, like with my record collection, I could remember where, when and often even why I bought a certain game. An **Edge** review, a forum recommendation, a bad day at work, a stop in HMV on the way home from the pub; we hold games dear to our hearts in the same way we do songs, because they are indelibly linked with our own histories. Whoever said smell was the most nostalgic thing never bought *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* from the Cheapside branch of VShop one Friday lunchtime then spent the whole weekend playing it, red-eyed, with their best friend.



I had a thoroughly pleasant, if gently back-breaking, Sunday afternoon trip down memory lane

Yet what really struck me about this little exercise was the way it helped me chart the course of the slow death of physical media. The inserts you used to get back then! The best was in *Gran Turismo*, a glossy double-sider that first trumpeted the features of the analogue Dual Shock (two words!) and on the other side extolled the virtues of the PlayStation memory card ("Big enough to hold 600 cars. Small enough to fit in your pocket"). A variation appeared in firstparty PS2 games, though the use of minor characters from *Jak And Daxter* didn't quite exert the same pull.

The real stars, however, were the manuals. Most went straight on the recycling pile without a second thought, but there was magic here, a reminder of a time when people actually thought about these things. The *We Love Katamari* manual is laid out like a kid's picture book, explaining the Quick Turn manoeuvre with a picture of a yellow monster and the words, "Oh no! It's The Bogeyman!!! Run away!!!"

Rockstar's manual-makers were the kings, though. They began with *GTAIII*'s 'Welcome to Liberty City' booklet, and after that just took the idea and ran with it. *Vice City*'s tourist pamphlet, *San Andreas'* local-business guide, *Episodes From Liberty City*'s anniversary edition of an underground magazine; *Canis Canem Edit*'s was a welcome brochure for new students. Then there was *GTAV*'s. Eight pages. A diagram of the controller layout, the EULA, a link to the online manual, and then nothing but sadness.

That little journey sums up the day. The closer I got to the current generation, the less wistful I was. I've probably played more games in the past five years than I did in the 30 previous ones, so perhaps it's natural that I don't feel quite the same emotional attachment to them. Maybe games just aren't as good these days. Or perhaps parenthood has left me an emotionally barren husk of a man who's no longer able to feel anything. God, I can't believe I'm having another one.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor. If you want to chastise him for dumping plastic boxes, he's on Twitter: @nathan_brown*

Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**



ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Ten years ago, while I was still living in San Francisco, I heard a tale about one of the early investors in various Silicon Valley startups such as Google, Apple and Microsoft. He was frustrated, the story went, because all the modern pitches he sat through started with a description about how they were going to change the world: they didn't have a plan, but they were going to 'reinvent' or 'disrupt' the act of making juice, or putting on your pants, or buying a pair of sunglasses. This was the opposite of all those companies he'd helped years earlier, which had started up with a clear and simple business plan. Along the way, they ended up changing the world.

Games these days are in a similar position. How much time are you spending on fluff about reinventing the industry or appealing to people who don't like games, versus the creative business of figuring out how to actually make something amazing? I once asked Will Wright whether he made *The Sims* to appeal to a new audience or to try something new, and he told me that he'd come up with the idea while reassessing his needs as a person after his house burned down in a massive fire. He thought if he found it interesting, so would others, and he used the craft he'd learned from *Sim City* and *Sim Ant* to put it together. Yet his early prototypes didn't even let you control the Sims themselves. It was a stroke of genius from designers like Claire Curtin and Roxana Wolosenko which helped turn a neat little virtual dollhouse into a massive, worldwide cultural phenomenon.

So how do you manage this, ensuring you have a practical, well-reasoned basis in craft, while leaving the door ajar for possible magic to come in? And how do you do it while trying to create a sustainable studio where you can provide a healthy lifestyle for a bunch of close friends and colleagues?

On the creative side, we already had a set of key principles that were core to the kind of games we wanted to make: that games were about inputs, not cinematics; that the hero is the player, not the avatar; that choices need consequences, and strict realism is overrated. That last one is the most subjective (and I draw a very clear line between believability and realism), but after a decade of making games with real-world settings, the lure of bending reality to fit a cool design idea, rather than squishing world, character and ability designs into the confines of real people, was just too strong.



They started up with a clear and simple business plan. Along the way, they ended up changing the world

Alongside these are a mess of business and practical realities. How much game can we make? Certainly not as much as we were used to at the big studios we'd previously inhabited. One of the easiest ways to fail is to attempt to create a triple-A title with ten per cent of the budget, but we thought we could make some big clean cuts without betraying our principles. For example, choosing to avoid linear, cinematic-driven narrative meant we didn't have to hire or source entire departments for animation, acting and voice direction.

The most surprising, and gratifying, realisation I've had so far has been that the industry really has changed since I was last in thirdparty publishing, back in the early 2000s. And I don't just mean the obvious improvements in digital distribution, or the fact that you can sell at more than one price point (both of which give more unusual games a better, and longer, chance to find an audience). The publishers themselves seem to be more open to discussion, too.

Gone are the days where they rattled off a list of features from *WOW*, or *GTA*, or *COD*, or whatever else was on top of the charts that day as the starting point for your game pitch. Now, everything seems to be on the table: price point, delivery mechanism, platforms, and release windows are all open to discussion and a much healthier focus is put on the game itself. That's not to say that everyone wanted what we were pitching – rather that it wasn't for any single, focused reason.

All of which is crucial to our chances of success. In order to even attempt to make something valuable and interesting, we have to lower the risk in other areas, not just for a publisher or investor who may be helping foot the bill, but also for ourselves. If we can keep scope focused on a core idea that's achievable, then we can keep the door open for new ones, and stronger flavours. As an artist said to me earlier today: "If we're going to fuck it up, let's at least not be boring about it." Quite.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Risky business

'Who dares, wins' is fine if you're in the SAS, but most of us are just trying to get through life unscathed. Developers aren't in the business of jumping out of the proverbial plane to sell a videogame: one gamble too many can spell disaster for a studio. Indeed, many of the titles in this month's Hype seem positioned to mitigate risk.

You'll probably like VR gangster caper *Blood & Truth* (p40), for instance, if you enjoyed *PlayStation VR Worlds*; Sony London Studios sold you the demo for it via *The London Heist*. Doubtless spurred on by the positive reception – you could waggle a revolver threateningly with one hand while huffing a Cuban with the other, for god's sake – this is *Heist* cranked up several notches, with a longer runtime and even some smart new ideas for the moments in which you're not manually slamming magazines into guns like a headsetted Keanu Reeves.

The creators of *Guacamelee 2* (p44) have had much the same idea. Luchador brawling's gone down smooth as mashed avocado (especially with the young 'uns. Less teeth, we suppose) in the past. Why not give them some more? Again, it's a case of iterating on the tried-and-true. Juan Aguacate's precisely designed moveset has even remained the same. It's the sequel's world that has expanded and improved, with the devs' recent blog post promising "More varied and interesting chicken gameplay" and "No memes". More of this sort of thing please, everyone.

And then there's *Battalion 1944* (p50). Having Kickstarted its homage to the shooters of yore, Bulkhead Interactive has already secured a modest – but passionate – playerbase: a small team and budget means it doesn't have to pray for a runaway success. If we were David Cage, however, we'd start putting in a word with the big man for *Detroit: Become Human* (p36). The more we see of it, the riskier it looks.

MOST WANTED

Sea Of Thieves Xbox One
A trailer that riffs on the famous 'Choose life' speech from Trainspotting has us all excited for silly multiplayer swashbuckling all over again. We're particularly keen for more details on its progression system: something's got to fill that *Destiny*-shaped hole in our schedules.

Lost Sphear PS4, Switch
An issue spent reminiscing about *Final Fantasy* has us seeking a taste of the JRPG glory days. *I Am Setsuna*'s makers seem to be providing exactly that with their next game, and more: smart changes to a classic battle system mean it's looking more glory than hoary.

Dragon Ball FighterZ
PC, PS4, Xbox One
Dragon Ball savants we are not, but each roster announcement baffles us a little more. Weird, maned man-fusion Gotenks destroys foes with a volleyball, while Kid Buu appears to be some kind of demonic genitalia. Whatever's going on, we're in.

HYPE

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

David Cage's android thriller just can't shy away from controversy

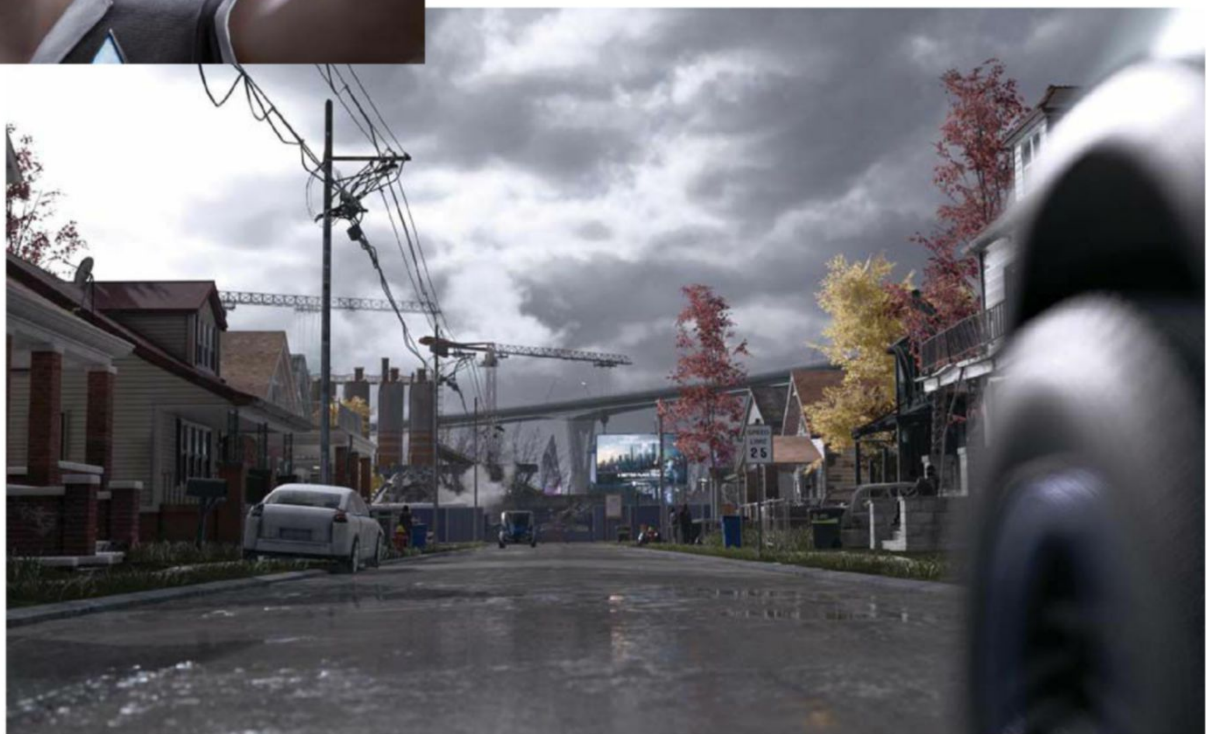
Developer	Quantic Dream
Publisher	SIE
Format	PS4
Origin	France
Release	2018

Kara, bought by drug-addled Todd to act as housekeeper and nanny after his wife left him, is programmed to follow orders. We don't see many players doing so here


KARA

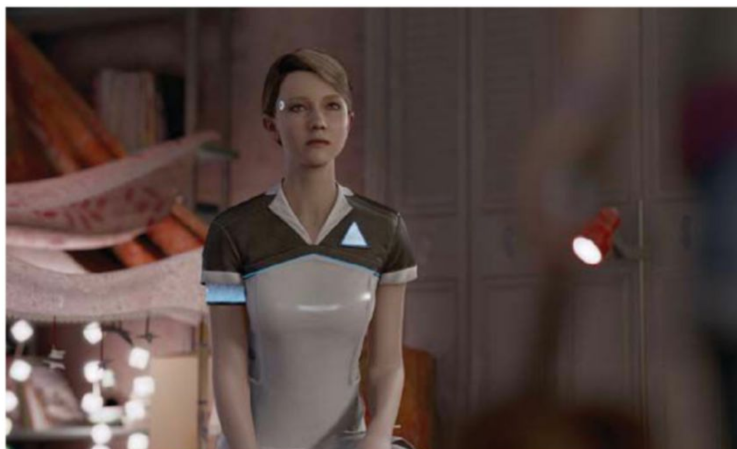






ABOVE **She may look pristine here, but after a run-in with Todd, Kara seeps blue blood, her face bruised white. She heals up in seconds, though.** TOP RIGHT **Todd is the real problem in this latest demo, but perhaps not for the reasons Cage and team intended. He's a caricature.** MAIN **There's no faulting the game's aesthetic, a winning sci-fi blend of gleaming neon towers and, beneath the surface, ramshackle poverty.** BELOW LEFT **Alice bears the brunt of Todd's wrath – he blames her, not his drug habit, for his wife leaving. Not to be harsh, but surely you'd take the kid too?** BELOW RIGHT **Kara's choices during the climactic action scene are standard fight-or-flight fare, though as in all Cage's games you have to work pretty hard to mess up**







DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

To be abundantly clear, David Cage can make a game about whatever on Earth he wants. Yet bravery is no shield from critique, and daring no guarantor of quality. The fuss around the latest showing of *Detroit: Become Human* was not born of its subject matter, a demo in which a drug-addled father beats his terrified young daughter – though whichever marketing bod deemed it at all appropriate for a livestream that went out shortly after the end of the school day may have a few regrets. *Detroit*'s is not a problem of tone. Rather, it is one of execution.

To put it bluntly, it was just *bad*. The father, Todd, sits on a sofa, huffing at a pipe, scratching madly at his arms, muttering darkly about his lot. Moments later, over dinner – just the thing after a whopping dose of amphetamine – he carries on with his miserablist schtick, complaining about the wife who left him because of his drug use. He leans towards Alice, his daughter. "Not the life you dreamed of, eh?" he slurs, his delivery wooden in the extreme, his accent impossible to place. It is at this point, shortly before he upends the dinner table and gives Alice a crushing backhander, that we realise this fellow looks familiar. Soon after, unbuckling his belt, he delivers the killing blow. "Alice," he calls up the stairs, "Daddy's very mad." Suddenly, it hits us. Todd is a dead ringer for Tommy Wiseau, writer, director and star of The Room, by common consensus the worst film ever made. Draw your own conclusions from that.

So yes, look, it's not very good – and, possibly worse, it fails to provide or explore the notional USP of David Cage's work. What difficult decision does this pose to the player? Todd heads upstairs, telling Kara, the family android, not to move. As Kara, we're given a choice: do we obey the order and stand still? Or do we disobey, head upstairs and stop him? We are not exactly torn. It would take one heck of a committed roleplayer to stand there and listen while a strung-out mess of a father goes to town on his five-year-old daughter. Upstairs waits Cage's stock-in-trade sequence of a woman fighting off a dangerous man, all desperate stick flicks and awkward combinations of button presses, before Kara and Alice somehow escape – Todd might be screaming at you from an upstairs window, or lying on the floor with a bullet in his chest – and ride to safety on a bus that arrives at the perfect time. Fade to black, and roll controversy.

It's hard to understand exactly what purpose it all serves. Yes, Cage is entitled to explore difficult themes – but only if those themes serve a higher purpose in the game's story or design. This does neither, and it's an odd fit for a game whose creator spent most of E3 insisting that the obvious racial connotations of his tale of an android underclass rising up were simply a coincidence. You cannot have it both ways.

Which is a shame, because another sit down with the sequence first shown on Sony's E3 stage in 2016 – where Connor, an android negotiator, talks a hostage-taking deviant down from a literal ledge – is engaging stuff. While it's tempting to roll the eyes at Sony trotting out an old demo again, it's a smart fit for the game, an opportunity to see what happens when different choices are made. We do our research indoors, each discovery raising our percentage chance of completion. But once we step outside, where an android has gone rogue and has a gun pointed to a young girl's head, we decide to play it differently to see just how wrongly things can go. We play it heartless, senseless and dumb. At E3, we'd raised our probability of success to 100 per cent, the girl saved, the deviant android pumped full of SWAT-team lead. Here, we push it down to 13 per cent; we save the girl, but only by killing Connor, sending him tumbling off the rooftop. In the context of the day, it's fitting, a series of ill-advised decisions leading, inevitably, to self-sabotage. Perhaps Cage, and Sony's marketing team, could do with heeding the game's own advice. ■

Worst of all, it fails to provide or explore the notional USP of David Cage's work



Kara chameleon

The star of the Paris Games Week demo, Kara, predates the game by some years. She was the focus of a tech demo shown by Quantic Dream at GDC in 2012, when the studio sought to show off what it had planned for then-next-gen platforms. Well, she looks even better now, perfect and gleaming in Todd's tumbledown fleapit of a home. The advantage Cage's tightly directed games have always had is their ability to devote all available processing power to a strictly controlled space; here, that means 4K, HDR and a welcome, if largely unnecessary, 60fps. Quantic Dream is an easy target for many reasons, but there's no querying its technical chops.

H | Y
P | E

BLOOD & TRUTH

PSVR's second wave kicks into gear with this stylish cockney shooter

Developer SIE London Studio
Publisher SIE
Format PSVR
Origin UK
Release 2018

PlayStation VR Worlds served two very similar, but fundamentally different, purposes. For the early adopter of PSVR, Sony London Studio's launch-day compendium of five shortform virtual-reality games was a generous, snackable spread that hinted at what an exciting new medium had to offer. For the studio, it meant getting a commercial return on a series of prototypes that it had devised while feeling around in the dark of a new, emerging technology.

"It was about London Studio getting to grips with the platform," **Stuart Whyte**, director of VR product development at the studio, tells us. "Trying DualShock 4, Move and head-only control systems; trying things like *The Deep*, which was almost a fairground ride, through to more nuanced gameplay-depth stuff, and just exploring. It was the perfect opportunity to throw loads of demos at the wall and see which ones stuck, really."

The stickiest of all was *The London Heist*, a 30-minute cockney-gangster caper that drew heavily from the Guy Ritchie style guide (sample line: "I'm gonna make bolognese out of that twat!"). It used head-tracking and dual Move controllers in intuitive, playful ways, and it went down well. Yet there was one loud, repeated criticism: there wasn't enough of it.

Enter *Blood & Truth*, in which the ideas proven in *The London Heist* are iterated upon, added to and expanded into a full-length game. It casts you as Ryan Marks, an elite special-forces soldier who returns from a posting overseas to find his family under threat – a familiar setup, certainly, but one which untethers London Studio from the you-muggy-slaaags trappings of cockney gangsterdom. While the game is, like its spiritual predecessor, set amid the grit and glamour of modern-day London, and has a cast with accents to match, the desired tone this time is that of an action movie. The team cites as inspirations the mobile, graceful gunplay of John Wick; the spectacular set-pieces of James Bond; and the light-hearted tone and improvisational style of Die Hard.

That's certainly an enticing blend, and an all-too-brief session at Paris Games Week confirms that London Studio could well be onto something. Tonally, it's intriguing enough, but it's VR that truly sells the thing, elevating a set of familiar, even rudimentary mechanics into something intuitive, accessible and thoroughly enjoyable. Look at a waypoint and click the large central Move button and you'll teleport there. Reaching the right-hand Move controller over to the holster on the left of your torso unholsters your weapon; you use your left hand to pull ammo clips from your belt, and snap them satisfyingly into place. While *The London* ▶



Stuart Whyte, director of VR development at SIE London Studio



ABOVE **Sadly there's no dual wielding available in our demo. Given the difficulty of shooting straight with the new aiming system, perhaps that's for the best.**
LEFT **You hunt this fellow through the casino, since he's apparently got some info on where your family have gone. Find him and, in another addition, your chat will have branching paths**









TOP **Planting C4 isn't as intuitive as some of the actions in our demo – it's the only thing we need to have explained to us by our handler.**
ABOVE **VR's great trick is the way it makes things we expect to be automated – in this case, reloading your gun – part of a gameplay loop**

TOP **It's not the prettiest game you'll see this year – you can thank the processing demands of VR for that – but it does a fine job of showing London's glitz and grime.**
MAIN **The final escape is a delight, but the real test of *Blood & Truth* will be how well London Studio manages the pace between the game's action sequences.**
RIGHT **The CCTV controls are simple enough: the buttons change cameras, the stick controls pan, and a slider manages zoom. There's no need for a tutorial here**





Heist put a laser sight on your pistol so you always knew where you'd be firing, here it's a holographic optic that can only be seen if you're properly aiming down the barrel. It's more difficult to line up shots, but all the more rewarding for it, and the change is offset by a friendlier reload system. In *The London Heist*, you couldn't put in a new clip until your current one was empty; here, you can do it whenever you like.

Those are the fundamentals, and will carry you through the whole game. Two face buttons can also be used to perform quick sidesteps left and right, however, to allow those who'd rather play the badass than star in a cautious cover shooter. Another optional button is used in gun tricks – reloading with a clip you've tossed into the air, for instance – to further ramp up the gun-fu fantasy. All these inputs, performed without a headset on, would be shown up for their obvious artifice, but here it really feels like you're loading a gun, rather than bringing together two wands with great blobs of neon light on the end of them. "Action games are one of the biggest genres on PlayStation," Whyte says, "But even the best games in the world are running on a screen, and that doesn't immerse you in the same way that VR does. When you put on that headset, you get immersed for free."

With that come other advantages – chiefly, the way a developer can make departures from a game's core mechanical template without needing to explain every little thing. So, moments into our demo, when we arrive at the foot of a ladder, look up and see no waypoint at the top to teleport to, we simply understand what to do, and reach for the first rung. Later, we'll crawl through a ventilation shaft, and flick through camera feeds at a CCTV monitoring station, panning and zooming using the knobs and dials we're given. And when we spot our quarry getting into a lift, and head off to follow, we know just how to use it, with no 'press X to call elevator' prompt in sight.

Those little detours are designed as pace breakers for the gunplay, but it's when the latter's in full flow that *Blood & Truth* truly sings. The need to properly line up your shots adds an air of clumsy desperation to our first play through the level – think of the bit in Pulp Fiction where an assailant somehow manages to fire an entire clip at the air around Samuel L Jackson, and you've pretty much got us pegged. It's funny, sure, adding a slapstick, madcap air to the action. But it motivates us, too, leaves us wanting to dive back in and get better.

The action builds to a climactic set-piece in which you sprint desperately through a casino building, with bad guys popping up everywhere, and while it feels a little like we're riding a trolley it's a frantic delight (though shooting nearby fire extinguishers slows the pace with a bullet-time effect). Yet the most intriguing moment comes when we finally corner our quarry, and aren't entirely convinced he's being honest with us. Mid-sentence, we shoot the floor between his legs, and he gives us a little more. We give him one in the shoulder, and he finally gives up the goods. Harsh, you might think, but give us a break – a colleague kneecapped him and put one between his eyes before he'd even said a word.

It really feels like you're loading a gun, rather than bringing together two wands

We've killed and maimed countless ne'er-do-wells in games over the years, of course, but once again it's the headset that elevates this particular act of virtual violence. And it's because of *Blood & Truth* that we leave Paris Games Week far more optimistic about PSVR's future than we had been before it. *VR Worlds* was the work of a studio tooling around to find out what works in VR; *Blood & Truth* is the fruit of it.

"One of the things that's been really refreshing about the move to VR is the fact that, for years and years, as an industry we've refined the design language of games," Whyte says. "A lot of those things just don't work in VR, so we have to create a new design language for a new medium. That's what makes it exciting. It also makes it an absolute bastard, because you can't copy what's come before." ■



Capital gains

Shortly before our demo, Whyte showed a montage of box art from across London Studio's back catalogue – a handy visual reminder that this is a developer which has always led the charge on Sony's less-than-traditional gaming initiatives. While it's perhaps best known for *The Getaway*, a cockney *GTA*-a-like that turns 15 this year, it's also the studio behind the *EyeToy* and *Singstar* series, as well as PS4 launch freebie *Playroom* and the short-lived *Wonderbook*. "It's a studio that's supported lots of Sony hardware," Whyte says. "And it's a studio that has, with PSVR coming out a year ago, found a big opportunity to reinvent itself. That's the exciting thing at the moment: there's something there, and we're right at the beginning of it."

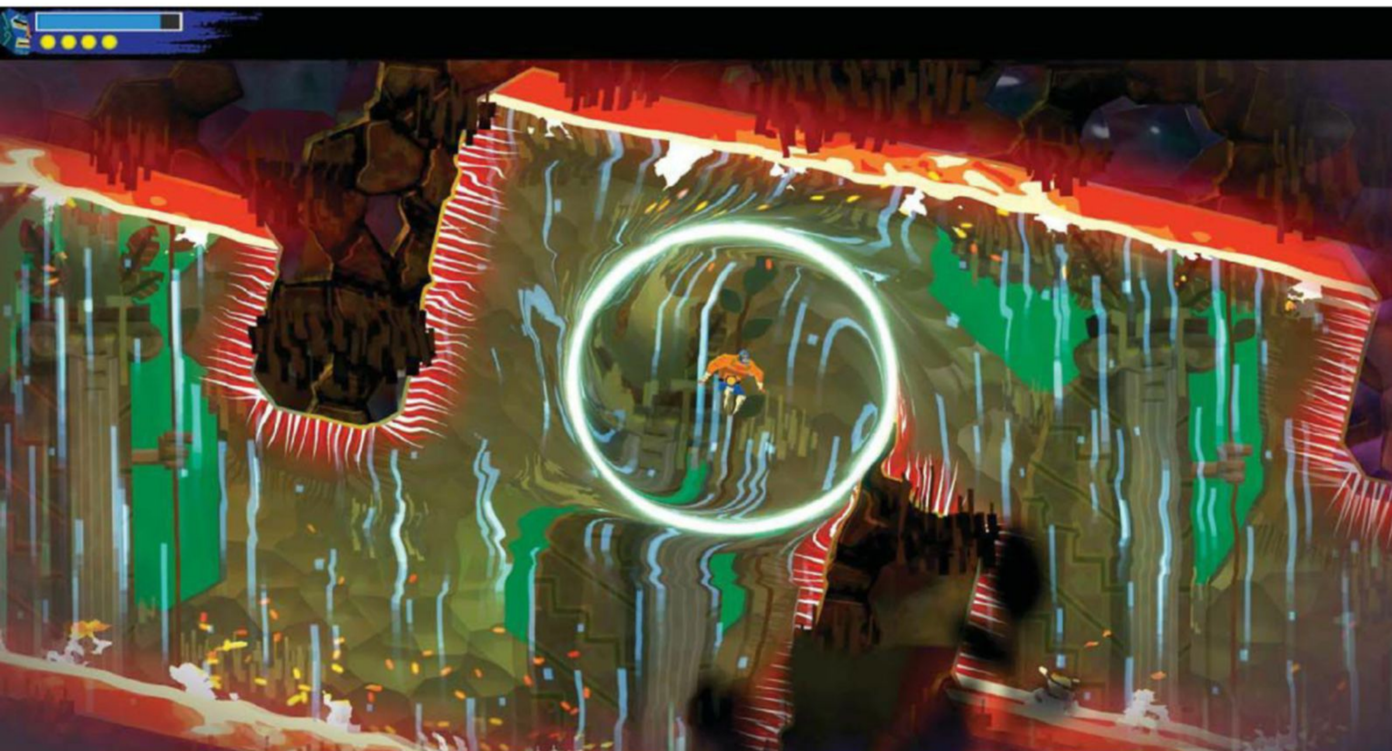
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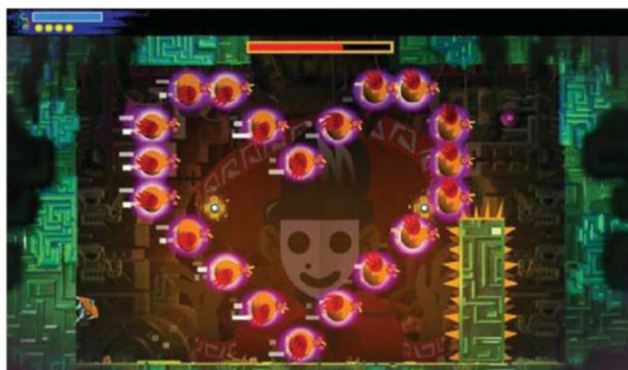
GUACAMELEE 2

Drinkbox's surprise sequel promises to be clucking good fun

Developer/publisher	Drinkbox Studios
Format	PS4
Origin	Canada
Release	Spring

Drinkbox insists solo players won't miss out. "Ideally, we want all the Trophies and all the content accessible in single-player for people who don't have someone to play with," Graham Smith says. "But we do also want players to be able to bring their friends in and play together at any time – and to have that experience feel pretty seamless"







TOP **A team at Drinkbox broke off from *Severed* while the ports were being developed, prototyping mechanics before the rest of the team joined in, hence the abundance of new ideas.** ABOVE **The narrative basis for this sequel's dimension waves is "still in flux", we're told, but it's allowed Drinkbox to build a range of more dynamic challenges.** ABOVE RIGHT **The studio's close relationship with Sony means it's launching first on PS4, but that doesn't mean *Guacamelee 2* won't be on other formats later.** RIGHT ***Guacamelee* boasted more satisfying combat than most Metroidvanias, and smashing up hordes of enemy skeletons remains a core element of the sequel**





GUACAMELEE 2

The chicken, Drinkbox co-founder **Graham Smith** tells us, was a happy accident. It's the kind of statement, said with total seriousness, that sums up the sometimes surreal nature of this job – and of videogames in general. But it's true: *Guacamelee*'s equivalent of Samus Aran's Morph Ball wasn't part of the plan. Then one day, a designer decided it would be good to take advantage of the studio's tech setup, which enabled it to hook up a controller to any enemy or NPC, to do just that for a chicken. The result was silly, fun, and perfectly in keeping with the game's offbeat sense of humour, so it stayed. For *Guacamelee 2*, it's earned something of a promotion, its role expanded from a fleeting cameo to a valuable supporting role. "Now that we have more time, we've tried to embrace it more fully, and pushed the mechanics of the chicken farther," Smith deadpans.

It's just one of a (free) range of new ideas that Drinkbox has been cooking up since the release of the first game. In fact, a few had already been earmarked for the original before the studio realised it had a game to ship, and cut them. For the three years or so that the studio spent developing *Severed*, ideas for a potential sequel would be floated from time to time, and the studio began to compile a list of them all. As such, once *Severed* wrapped, *Guacamelee 2* got off to a flyer. Little wonder, then, that only a year into development, it's already looking in healthy shape.

You couldn't quite say the same for protagonist Juan, who, since the first game, has been enjoying the quiet life. It's seven years later, and he now has a family, with two kids, before a mysterious event forces him to don his luchador mask once more. Smith is coy about the precise nature of the story, but temporary retirement is not a bad narrative excuse to pull the common *Metroidvania* trick of having a hero conveniently forget the powers they possessed in the previous game just so they can learn them anew.

You shouldn't expect to earn too many new moves, however; having studied other sequels in the same genre, Smith is cognisant of the fact that a hero's basic moveset rarely changes too much from game to game. No bad thing, we reckon: one of the original's strengths was its wrestling-themed combat, and the way Juan's grappling moves factored into traversal, with uppercuts lifting him to higher platforms and stomps crashing through floors. "We experimented with the idea of an entirely new moveset," Smith admits. "We were really trying to keep an open mind. But we quickly found that any new mechanics we came up with for Juan's super moves just weren't as intuitive as those we had from the first game. So to distinguish this game from the original, we started trying to push down other avenues."

Juan's feathered companion is one of those avenues, of course. It was, Smith acknowledges, "pretty useless for platforming and for combat", but that's all changed, to the point where you can now spend "significant portions of the game" as this pint-sized flapping and fighting machine. Otherwise, it's the world that has changed in the seven years Juan's been away. Dimension waves allow the land of the living and the dead to share the same screen at once, prompting some tricky platforming and brawling challenges as deadly lava suddenly becomes harmless, or you race to finish off vulnerable enemies before a wave passes by and renders them immune to your attacks. There's a gravity-flipping element Smith is reluctant to say much more about for the time being. And there are floating hook points that Juan can latch onto and leap between, in a fashion reminiscent of *Ori And The Blind Forest*'s Bash ability.

> ***The result was silly, fun, and perfectly in keeping with the game's offbeat humour***

As with *Ori* – and, of course, the original *Guacamelee* – you'll have to steel yourself for a test. Even with three friends alongside you, the platforming requires careful timing, dexterity and no little patience, and with enemies scaling to match player numbers, it doesn't get any easier as a group. Still, *Guacamelee* players are unlikely to chicken out of a challenge – even if they end up playing as one. ■



All four Juan

Strictly speaking, four-player co-op isn't completely new to *Guacamelee*: the option was retro-fitted into the PC and PS4 versions of 2014's *Super Turbo Championship Edition*. But the sequel has been built with local multiplayer in mind from the start. Smith admits accommodating a quartet of luchadores has brought its own challenges, namely with camera movement and readability. For the latter, small numbered triangles will allow players to keep better track of their character. Through extensive playtesting, Drinkbox has made a number of camera tweaks to ensure a smooth co-op experience, but Smith assures us solo players shouldn't be concerned. "We're addressing these multiplayer issues as we're finding them," he says, "but in ways that will not hurt the singleplayer experience in any way."



Developer Mountains
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format iOS
Origin Australia
Release 2018



FLORENCE

A touchscreen plus a new indie team equals a perennial love story

Relationships are hard. There's no 'win' state for love: perhaps that's why videogames tend to give the subject a wide berth. "Gamer culture is very traditional, very conservative," says **Ken Wong**, creative director at Mountains. "Early games focused on things that early games did really well: racing, combat – construction, even. But not feelings. Feelings were a little harder to achieve."

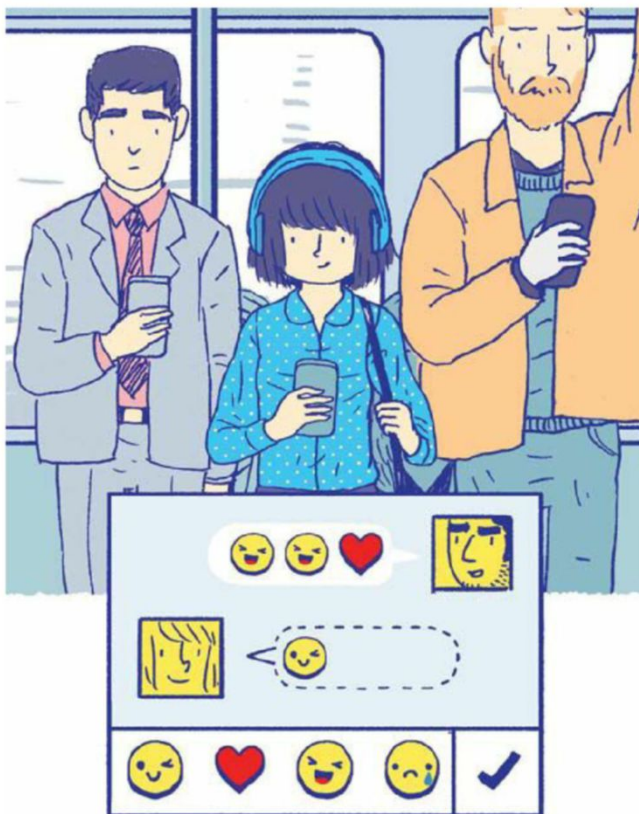
Wong's latest title, however, hopes to accomplish just that. An interactive graphic novel for smartphones, it tells the story of a young woman, Florence, falling in love for the first time. This isn't Wong's first foray into the world of mobile games: he was lead designer on smartphone puzzle hit *Monument Valley*. "It hit such a broad audience," Wong says. "We were surprised, because we thought we were making a game for hipsters. As it turns out, a lot of people could engage with *Monument Valley*: older people, kids, people sharing it with their parents and partners."

Florence was born of Wong's desire to connect with a different kind of gaming audience again. "A lot of people can relate to not just the good stuff about love – having a crush, the first date – but also the painful stuff, when you have arguments, misunderstandings, or start feeling like you're drifting apart. It's this universal thing."

And a mobile device is the ideal setting for this tale of modern love: a personal, familiar thing, with an intuitive touchscreen interface. When Florence's alarm clock goes off, you almost instinctively tap it to snooze it. When it rings again, insistent and shrill, you tap it again. "Through this simple interaction, we're saying Florence is the kind of person who wants to stay in bed another five minutes," Wong says. Florence is in a bit of a rut. Every swipe and tap of the game's opening vignettes reinforces this feeling, whether it's having her brush her teeth, enter data at her accountancy job, check social media or eat a takeaway dinner bite by stodgy bite.

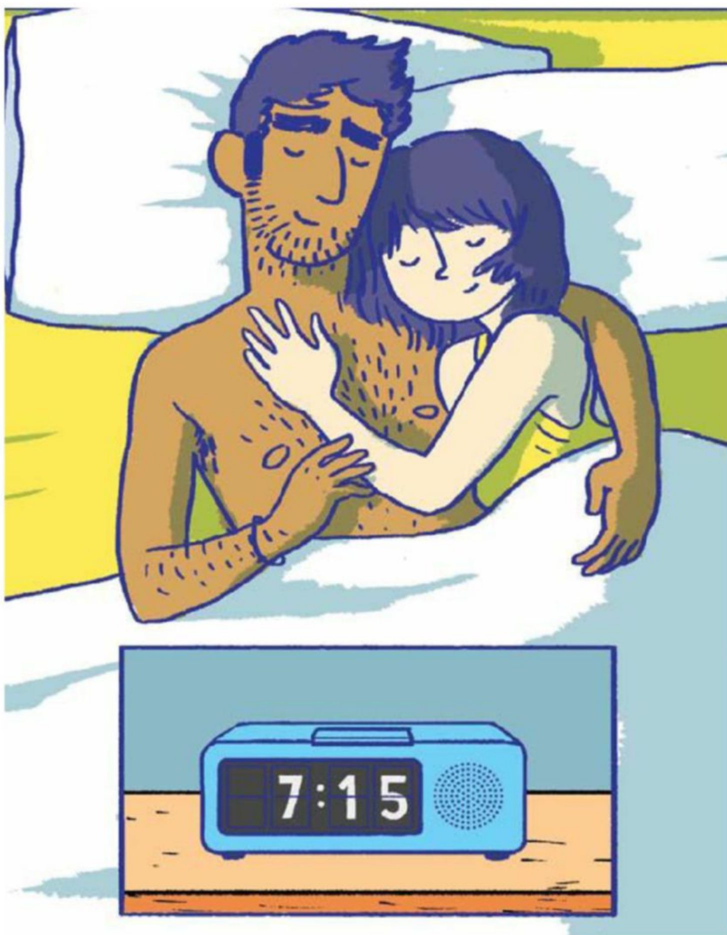
It's when Florence meets Krish for the first time that things change – for her, and the player. A nerve-wracking first date, for instance, feels distinctly more challenging than all that office number-crunching because of how Mountains has you interact with the scene. Elsewhere, curt taps become gentle strokes and touches as Florence and Krish's

"The phone game that made me want to become a mobile developer was *Tiny Wings*," Wong says. Made by a solo developer in seven months, it inspired him to make his own more experimental fare



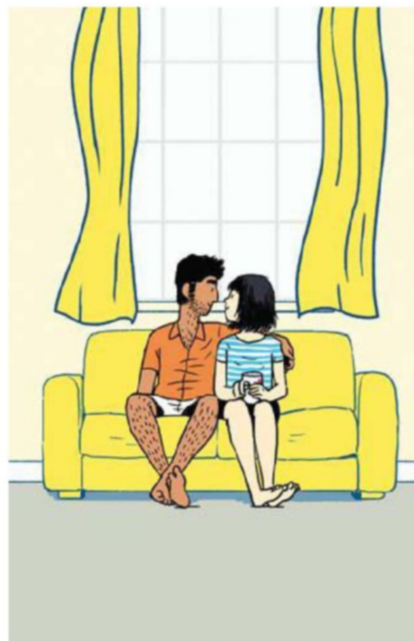


ABOVE **Wong likens designing new user experiences to the layouts of theme parks or museums, letting visitors navigate in their own way: "We can do the same thing with games, how you guide people through a space"**



ABOVE **Hooking up with Annapurna has been a delight, Wong says. "I'm in really good hands. It doesn't feel like my game is being scrutinised by a company. It feels like they are genuine creative partners"**

BELOW **Music is a key part of telling a story in a universal language. Krish – a musician himself – is represented by a cello, while Florence is a piano. "Sometimes you have them in harmony, and then sometimes bickering," Wong says. "Working with our composer has been amazing because he's not just creating the background music, he's doing a lot of the storytelling as well"**





relationship blossoms. It's a format suited to exploring the idea of intimacy. But you're not able to nudge the relationship to success or failure. "It's a linear story," Wong says. "But actively participating creates a stronger connection. I think that's where we can explore love in ways other mediums can't.

"Other games do it through choice. But I'm interested in choices that don't have a correct answer," he continues. "Often in a relationship, that's the situation. You might love this person, but sometimes there's nothing that you can say that will make them happy. So I think of it as choreography. We're getting the player to go through a range of emotions." Retaining control over the story likely makes things simpler for Mountains' four-person team, but this presentation of love as something unable to be checkmated is a mature – and fresh – approach.

"I think there are bits of all of my previous relationships in the game – and those of the people around me, things that I see my friends and family go through," Wong says. "I'm like, 'Oh, that's why people come apart, or that's how people get together.'" And Wong and his team are embarking upon a tentative new relationship of their own while making *Florence*. "You usually start a new team with friends you've already worked with. We've had to spend one-and-a-half years learning how to read each other. It almost feels like being in a band. There's always a little bit of

A mobile device is the ideal setting for this tale of modern love: a personal, familiar thing

drama, a little bit of friction there, and as you work together, you get to know people's partners, and dating habits, and that's human life. And how great is it that you can take the things that you care most about and put that into your work?

"I had such anxiety about following up *Monument Valley* and trying to find something that meant as much to me as that project did. I think I've succeeded." He corrects himself. "I think *we* found something that means a lot to all of us." ■



Ken Wong, creative director

The public eye

Florence is closer to being a visual novel than anything else. "One of the questions that we've had to field is, 'Is it really a game?'" Wong says. "We don't really care if people don't think it's a game. That comes back to why we perhaps haven't tackled love and intimacy in games as much as other mediums. It's that idea that a *real* game has to play a certain way – it has to resemble a board game, or a sport, or Star Wars." In fact, even when and where you look is a kind of interactive element. Wong's background as an illustrator has informed the way in which he controls the player's gaze. "It's all about visual language and readability. We direct people's eyes around the page and that's followed into my work [in games]."

Developer Bulkhead Interactive
Publisher Square Enix Collective
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release TBA







BATTALION 1944

A UK indie studio is on a mission to bring back the classic FPS

There's something about World War II that ignites FPS fans' interest. When Bulkhead Interactive first announced *Battalion 1944* in 2016, it was the setting that turned heads. The prospect of a modern shooter returning to the historical stomping ground of *Call Of Duty* and *Medal Of Honor* lit the touchpaper: in just under three days, *Battalion* reached its £100,000 Kickstarter goal. In 30 days, it more than tripled it. Then Activision unveiled *Call Of Duty: WWII*.

Disaster? Not at all. In fact, *Battalion*'s executive producer Joe Brammer had been expecting it, having picked up on telling tweets from a *Call Of Duty* level designer ahead of the announcement. There's a difference between setting a shooter at the scene of nostalgia, and making something feel old school. *Battalion*'s development team has a keen understanding of what made the glory days of the FPS so, well, glorious – and it wasn't tanks, M1 Garands or ghillie suits.

Bulkhead is obsessive about recreating the feel of classic shooters. "It's back to basics," creative producer **Howard Philpott** tells us. "There are no killstreaks, no perks – just you and your skill with a weapon. I don't think other developers can do that anymore: you have to have this progression system in larger titles. We're in this unique position where we



Howard Philpott, creative producer

Handy points of cover won't disappear under fire: environments remain resolutely indestructible





In the interest of fairness, there'll be no weapon unlock system in *Battalion 1944*. Instead, experience points can be spent on cosmetic changes, including fancy gun engravings and the option to embroider your clan insignia on your character's clothes



can make decisions that we feel gamers want; a subset of gamers who want the competitive experience of the old games."

The comforting plink of medals is nowhere to be heard during our 5v5 Team Deathmatch. Instead, it's the terrifying ka-chuck of Kar98s as our enemies try to surreptitiously reload on the other side of low stone walls. "FPS games have moved into players going through a run-of-the-mill shooter: run, spawn, die," Philpott says. "With this, we're really focusing on how you move throughout the level, and how you have to put that extra thought in."

> *"There's no killstreaks, no perks – just you and your skill with a weapon"*

In the absence of the audiovisual distractions we've grown accustomed to, we are more aware of our surroundings. There is a minimap, although our eyes don't flick up to it as often. Instead, we're led by sound — or the map itself, a maze of staircases, pathways, corners and sight lines which, coupled with a very low time-to-kill on single shot rifles in particular, demands constant movement if we're to survive. It's *Battalion*'s movement that gives it away: smoother than its PS2 inspirations, perhaps a touch too fast.

But the breakneck speed complements Bulkhead's commitment to retaining the old-school focus on one-to-one movement, skill and creativity. "We make obvious routes in maps: the three-lane route that's always successful," Philpott says. "But what we're trying to focus on is adding that extra layer. If you know how to control your character so you can crouch-jump over walls, or strafe-jump around a corner, you get an extra layer of verticality to the map that newer players won't find straight away."

This often means programming bugs, along the lines of *Quake*'s strafe-jumping, back into the game intentionally, or forgoing a vault animation so players retain full control of where they're looking and shooting. We manage to cancel our reload animation with a weapon switch: even if the time advantage is miniscule, the satisfaction is enormous.

Whether the comparatively minor buzz will be enough to draw in players accustomed to the headier hits of triple-A animation and siren chimes of XP notifications remains to be seen. But, as evidenced already by a legion of Kickstarter backers and alpha testers, there's a huge appetite for the classic shooter, and Bulkhead doesn't need to rely on massmarket appeal. "Because of the size of our studio and the way that we work, we don't need a huge success," Philpott says. "We've done this on quite a small budget, and we have a dedicated team to pump out content to keep hardcore fans interested." On this evidence, they have plenty of reason to be. Perhaps the true draw of World War II lies in the underdog winning out through strength and heart. ■

There's a delicious snap to the animation when aiming down sights, although we wouldn't say no to a bit more recoil on our guns



Setting sights

Battalion 1944 is definitely aimed at shooter enthusiasts, but that doesn't mean Bulkhead isn't trying to appeal to a wide range of skill levels. "With our matchmaking mode, we're allowing you to play solo, but also as a team," Philpott says. "When you play as a team, it doesn't affect your solo rank. So if a friend who's not played shooters before wants to play with you, you're not going to sacrifice your skill ranking. You can play together and you'll have a shared rank, which is a lot better for people trying to learn the game." The team is also keeping an eye on recent hits: "We're looking at stuff like how much of a big success *Battlegrounds* is… we are definitely looking at the market and seeing what we can do."



ROUND-UP

DEAD STATIC DRIVE

Developer/publisher Team Fanclub **Format** PC **Origin** Australia **Release** TBA



Melbourne-based developer Mike Blackney has been charting development of a game he's pitching as *Grand Theft Cthulhu* on social media. But its appearance at Double Fine's Day Of The Devs offered a reminder of what makes it special. It's a survival game that's also a road trip, where you'll blast nasties while dealing with more prosaic concerns – such as the need to relieve yourself, or the importance of parking close enough to the petrol pump, lest you pull the hose taut and fall over. Blackney says it's an "anti-Roguelike"; rather than permadeath, it's *Dead Static Drive*'s reactive, surprising world that will encourage replays.

TOEJAM AND EARL: BACK IN THE GROOVE

Developer Humanature Studios **Publisher** Adult Swim Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** 2018



Given the recent spate of comebacks for early '90s mascots – we're still reeling from the discovery of just how many *Crash Bandicoot* fans are out there – the revival of Sega's hip-hop-loving aliens seems less unlikely by the day. Original creator Greg Johnson has apologised for a short postponement until the New Year, but with its charming throwback looks and the involvement of Adult Swim, this could well fulfil the tacit, ambitious promise of its title.

BLUE OMEN OPERATION

Developer/publisher Bananasoft
Format PC **Origin** US **Release** September 2019



This RPG quickly hurtled past its Kickstarter goal, and no wonder. It's as deliciously crisp as a classic Japanese PC game, yet rippling with the hyperactive energy of vintage anime. Influences have been chosen shrewdly, with a battle system that tips its hat to *Paper Mario*, *Undertale* and even *WarioWare*.

PROJECT HOSPITAL

Developer/publisher Oxymoron Games
Format PC **Origin** Czech Republic **Release** 2018



Management sim *Theme Hospital* is the obvious reference point for this debut from Oxymoron Games, which promises to cure our nostalgia but seems keener to indulge it. Still, with an extensive suite of building tools and a broad range of real-world illnesses to deal with, it looks in rude health.

RXN: RAIJIN

Developer Gulti **Publisher** Kayac
Format Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** December



A rare thirdparty Switch exclusive, this top-down shooter is as anime as all get-out – perfect for region-free hardware, you'd think, yet it's coming out over here, too. *RXN: Raijin* is a horizontally aligned vertical scroller with a special technique that lets you sacrifice a little health to slow time in a pinch.

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY







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FINAL FANTASY
30TH ANNIVERSARY

Never-ending story

The untold legend of the world's greatest RPG

BY SIMON PARKIN

On the last day of development of a new *Final Fantasy* game, **Hironobu Sakaguchi**, a man who looks like he would maintain his kindly half-smile even while asking you to clean out your desk and never come back, would gather the entire team into the office. Together, in a weary but exhilarated silence, everyone would sit and watch the ending to the game on which they had worked for the past weeks, months and, in the case of later entries to the series, years. Tears would fall. Champagne would flow. It was finally finished.

Except, of course, *Final Fantasy*'s title has always been a winking misnomer. The morning after the night before, the team would blearily gather again, this time each member holding a blank sheet of paper headed with the question: where now? The other titanic series of the videogame industry return, with each new entry and expansion, to Hyrule, to Azeroth, to San Andreas and all the rest. In *Final Fantasy*, however, every world is born anew, a grand and continuous act of creation and reinvention that has, over the course of three decades, come to represent a constellation of realities, each distinct apart from a few common props.

The business of multiverse creation began in a beauty salon on the outskirts of Tokyo in the mid-1980s. Sakaguchi, a student at the time, only applied for a job at Square, a tiny, chaotic start-up, because he believed that he had neither the skills nor the experience to work at more established game studios. With a ragtag band of other young people, he learned how to make games in front of the old hairdryers and panoramic mirrors. Numerous times the venture almost failed, not least because of the hubris of Square's founder Masafumi Miyamoto, a twentysomething part-time employee at Keio University who almost sent the company spiralling into bankruptcy.

Square Enix's present-day HQ in Shinjuku, Tokyo. Things weren't quite so grand 30 years ago, of course; the founders set up shop in a vacant hairdresser's studio





In Final Fantasy, every world is born anew, a grand and continuous act of creation and reinvention

The story of these early years and all that followed has never been fully told, not least because many of the key players have parted in dramatic fashion along the way. Sakaguchi, *Final Fantasy*'s visionary creator, left Square under a dark cloud following the commercial failure of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, a CGI film that lost an estimated $90 million at the box office. Following his departure, staff were allegedly instructed by Square's CEO not to talk to Sakaguchi, in an attempt to excise his influence.

In recent years, the ice has somewhat thawed even as the storied series has, in the 14th and 15th games, begun to rediscover the wild magic of its former days. A reconciliation of sorts allows – on this, the 30th anniversary of the first game – the story to be told by those who were there, in their own words, finally.





Hironobu Sakaguchi (front, centre), Nobuo Uematsu (front, left) and other members of the *Cruise Chaser Blassty* team in March 1986. Pixel artist Kazuko Shibuya (back, centre) defined Final Fantasy's in-game character style across the first six games.

CHAPTER

I

In The Beginning

Hironobu Sakaguchi

I grew up in a place called Ibaraki, a rural region north of Tokyo.

There was a cliff face close to my family home. While I was in primary school, I'd go there and chip away at the rock in search of precious stones and fossils. One day, an elderly man holding a briefcase walked up to me. He said that he'd seen me there, working away each day. He explained that he was a geologist. The man opened a briefcase, which was filled with immaculate fossils and precious stones and asked if I would like to swap one of my rough specimens with a polished one. Then, every week for about two years, I swapped my excavations with the man, till I had enough polished stones to fill a display case in my bedroom.

Our house was filled with books. My mother, who was a bookworm, owned a twenty-volume work about bugs and butterflies, written by a British etymologist. I had taken piano lessons since the age of five and, when I arrived at high school, I founded a band called Bichou, or 'beautiful butterfly'. I thought I would grow up to be a professional musician and started putting on lots of concerts at school. I booked a large venue for my band to play and didn't want to lose money on it, so I printed off tickets and started selling them at a local girls' school. When my teachers found out, I was nearly expelled.

When I arrived at university the Apple 2 had just come out and I wanted one. They were incredibly expensive. I was a student and couldn't afford that kind of outlay, of course, so I went to Akihabara, Tokyo's electronics district, where they sold cheap knock-offs. Even those machines were pretty expensive but still I managed to buy one. Once I had the machine I wanted to buy software, so I needed a part-time job. That's when I saw the role advertised for Square. It seemed like a good fit, because I was studying programming at university and figured I could pick up some experience on the job. I still dreamed of becoming a musician.

Square had just started when I joined. They were renting an old hairdresser's place. We had to take the mirrors off the walls. We didn't have enough computers for everyone, so we had to take turns. Our founder, Masafumi Miyamoto, worked in the science and technology department at Keio University, which was next door to the hairdresser's. His plan was to rope in technically minded university students to work at the company – but he never actually ended up hiring any students from that college.

I took the job because my computer skills were still quite basic. I felt that, if I'd have tried to go to one of the more established companies like Konami or Namco, who were already very well known, I would have been given just menial tasks. My interview was with the vice-president Hisashi Suzuki. He was in a similar place to me in life: very young and only part-time. It was all quite casual. Suzuki was like, "Yeah, yeah, come along and join us."

For my first job I was assigned as one of the programming team for a game based on the TV gameshow Torin-ingen, which is a birdman contest where people create costumes and see how far they can fly while jumping off a pier into the sea. Then, suddenly, the team was disbanded and the project cancelled. I later found out it was because Miyamoto hadn't secured the licence, and the TV show had found out what we were doing and shut us down. That's the kind of company we were back then – chaotic. Soon after that we moved to a more professional three-room office in Yokohama. It was a good place to be because we were all students there and it was like having a place to hang out. That's when we started work on our first game: *The Death Trap*. Others followed, but we certainly didn't have any big hits at that time. It was pretty tough, to be honest.



Hironobu Sakaguchi

As a child Sakaguchi, who grew up in the rural district of Ibaraki, north of Tokyo, had planned to become a professional musician. He played in a host of different bands, showing an early entrepreneurial spirit by staging concerts in local halls, for which he sold tickets. His dreams changed, however, when he first saw the Apple 2 computer. At university, Sakaguchi saved up and bought a bootleg version of the machine, on which he designed and programmed a couple of basic RPGs for his own amusement. Before long his hobby became a profession when he joined Square, then a tiny firm staffed almost exclusively by university students. The job proved a massive distraction from his studies, which took eight years – time during which the first *Final Fantasy* was made.

> "There were no seniors in the company. We were totally free"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

When the Torin-ingen team was wiped out I was moved on to my next project and became a director. I wasn't really promoted; I was just always a director from then on. I was 22 years old when I became a full-time employee. We didn't go home often during those years. We'd start work at midday and carry on through till the evening, then we'd go out drinking. The laws were different then so the arcades could be open all night. We'd spent most of the night playing, then in the morning we'd either go home to catch a few hours sleep or go straight back to the office. It was all new. My generation was the first to make videogames. There were no seniors in the company; we could make our own decisions. We were totally free. The sense of liberty was incredible.

About that time we desperately needed to hire artists to draw for these games, so we hired three people from a local art university. One of those was a friend of Nobuo Uematsu. One day she told me about this young composer friend of hers. It turned out that he worked in a local record store I used to visit.





Through the cherry blossom sits Keio University, attended by Sakaguchi and other early members of Square staff

Nobuo Uematsu

After I finished university, I wanted to become a professional composer but there were no jobs around. I lived in an apartment with a lot of artists, novelists and composers in a similar position to me. We'd sit around and talk and drink at night, but none of us really had any job prospects at the time. One of these friends, Miki Yukinoura, was a graphic designer at this small game company called Square. She had worked on Square's very first game, *The Death Trap*, and came to me and asked whether I would like to contribute some music to a new game they were making. It was called *Cruise Chaser Blassty*, and they needed some extra tracks written, as they planned to release the game with a vinyl record. I wrote the music at home, using a four-track recorder and a bunch of different synthesisers.

At the time I was working part-time in a record rental shop close to where I was living in Hiyoshi, Yokohama. The shop was just around the corner from Square's offices at the time. So, even before I was asked to do this work, I already knew Hironobu from when he'd come into the store and rent Kate Bush records.

Now, at that time, I had a lot of strange, slightly odd people in my personal life – people with what you might almost describe as occult powers. One of these guys came to me and said: "Mr Uematsu: your life is about to turn around. You're going to be a big success." The very next week I was walking in Yokohama and, by chance, Hironobu was on the other side of the street. We crossed to chat. He asked me what I was up to and then told me that there were plans to make Square into a proper company, and would I like to come along and join. That was my interview, right there in the street.



Nobuo Uematsu

Nobuo Uematsu was born in Kochi, on the island of Shikoku, Japan. A promising gymnast, as a child Uematsu wanted to become a professional wrestler. Uematsu's sister played piano. He taught himself some basic chords but never had any formal lessons. At university, Uematsu formed a band called Random House, but soon realised he wasn't a natural performer, so decided to focus on composition instead. The lead singer of Random House was picked up by a record company. Uematsu was asked to compose an advertising jingle for the Marui Department Store, which she then sang. This early success proved to be an anomaly. At 25, Uematsu was still working in a record store on the outskirts of Tokyo.

Sakaguchi About that time Miyamoto came to me and said, "We are going to be a more serious company now." That made it easier for me to invite new people on board. When I ran into Nobuo in the street I told him we were going to be a more professional place. In an effort to become a more serious company, Miyamoto decided to rent a new studio in the Ginza, Tokyo's high-class district.



Nasir Gebelli was a celebrated programmer of action games in the Apple 2 scene when he accepted a role at Square in Japan. It paid off. Gebelli reportedly retired in 1994 on royalties

> "There was a feeling that the company was going to shut down"
>
> **Nobuo Uematsu**

Uematsu That was part of his pitch to me: Square was going to move to the Ginza or one of the other terrifically expensive areas in central Tokyo. I figured that the company must be doing incredibly well. That definitely influenced my decision to accept the offer. We actually did move to that luxurious office, about two or three months later. It was a proper office building. But the rent there was ridiculously high: around £10,000 per month. After a couple of months we just couldn't pay, and moved out.

Sakaguchi The rent at this new, smaller office in Okachimachi was about a tenth of that in the Ginza.

Uematsu That extended the company's life expectancy, but Square still didn't have a hit game. Among those of us on the shop floor there was a feeling that the company was going to shut down soon. But we were all young. It was no big deal. We just figured we'd go and do something else instead.

Sakaguchi Now, we'd had one good stroke of fortune. A year after I joined the company full-time we hired Nasir Gebelli, a programmer from Iran who had moved to America after the Iranian cultural revolution. He was a legend in the Apple 2 programming world and one of my gods. How did we manage to convince such a famous programmer to move to Japan to work for a tiny software company? Well, Miyamoto was visiting the US and he met Gebelli at a party. Gebelli explained that he had just split up with his wife and needed a job. He had absolutely no money at all – just a Ferrari that he'd been left in the divorce settlement! Miyamoto told me the news and, in the same breath, explained that I was going to be Gebelli's minder in Japan. I protested: "I can't even speak English!"

When Gebelli arrived, he told me that he would only eat steak. Every day I'd have to take him out to a steak restaurant. I was 23 years old.



***Cruise Chaser Blassty*, one of Square's earliest games and the first to which Uematsu contributed, launched alongside a red vinyl-record soundtrack, the first example of the savvy merchandising for which Square would become known**

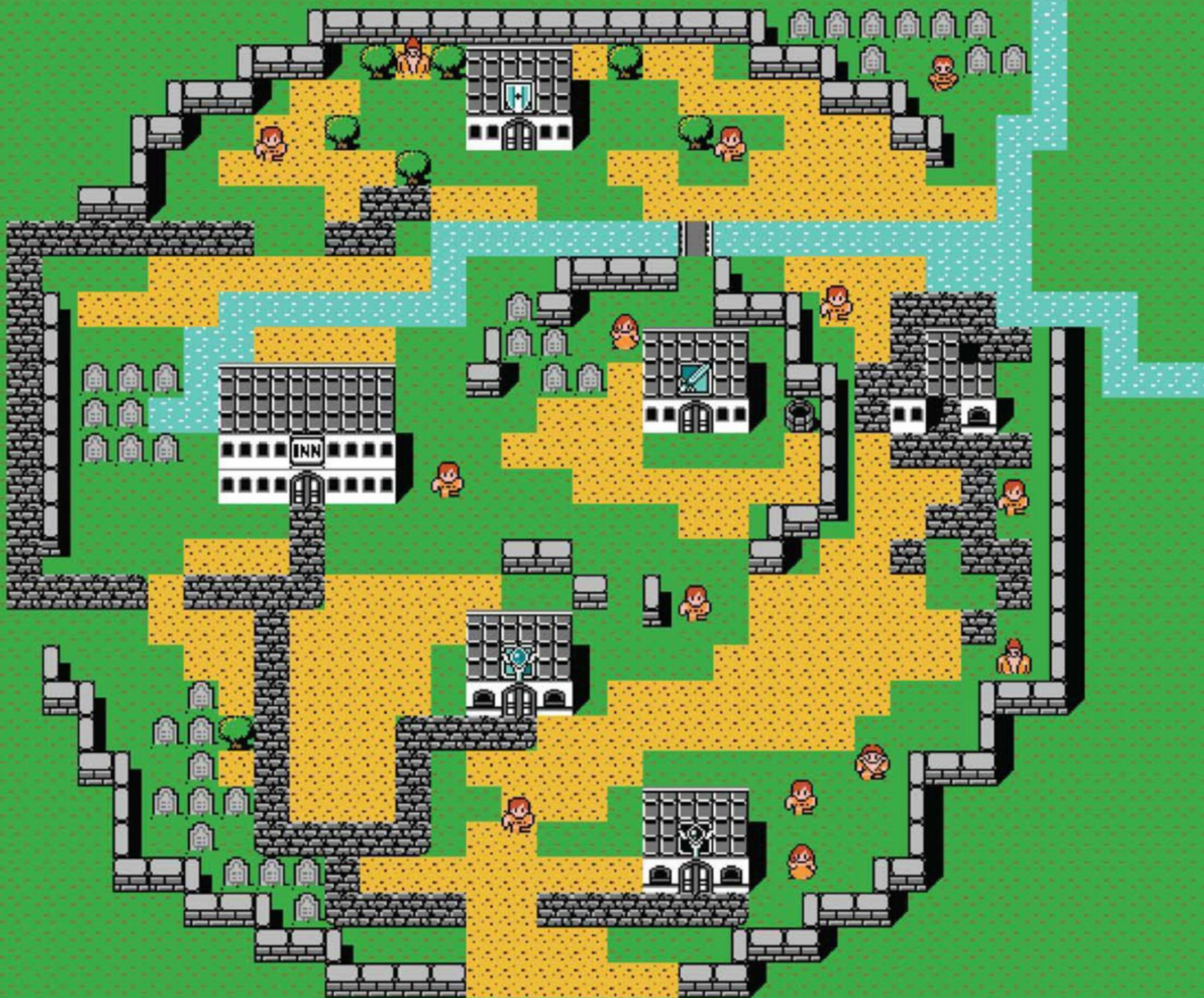




CHAPTER

II

The End Is Nigh



Sakaguchi After moving to the Ginza the company was in real financial trouble. We had been trying to make games for the Famicom Disc System, but we didn't have the skills to compete with the larger companies. To help us out of this mire, Miyamoto gathered the four game directors together and told us to each come up with a proposal for a game. The rest of the employees, he told us, would then vote on which of the four games the company should make, based on which one they thought had the best chance at commercial success.

I had wanted to make an RPG for years after playing *Ultima* and *Wizardry* on the Apple 2. But Square was focused on making Famicom games and, without a save function on the cartridge, I could see no way to make these games work. Then Enix's *Dragon Quest* came along. It used an ingenious code-based system that allowed players to save their game progress. It was primitive and simplistic, sure, but it worked.

So I pitched *Final Fantasy* as my game to the company. I told the staff that, if they picked my game, we'd sell more copies than *Dragon Quest*. They just laughed. When the time came for the staff to pick which game they wanted to make, only three people out of the entire company voted for *Final Fantasy*. One of those was Gebelli, who didn't really have a choice in the matter thanks to all those steak dinners. He actually didn't know what an RPG was; he had only ever programmed action games. I explained it all to him and he said, "What's so interesting about that?" I said, "Just do as you're told and it'll make sense in the end." I still remember that argument.

One of the other directors pitched a movie tie-in for the Aliens film. That sounds like it will sell, right? The rest of the staff agreed. Even so, Miyamoto told me that I was allowed to make *Final Fantasy*, on the proviso I could do it with just four staff on my team. Thankfully, they were all very talented people: Koichi Ishii, Akitoshi Kawazu, Uematsu and Gebelli. We made the game in ten months.

When it comes to classical fantasy, people of my generation were influenced by novels like the Elric series by Michael Moorcock and Guin Saga by Kaoru Kurimoto. These were the famous fantasy stories at the time. And the front covers for all these books were all drawn by one Japanese artist: Yoshitaka Amano.

Yoshitaka Amano

Mr Sakaguchi had just started on *Final Fantasy*, and was looking for an artist to draw some of the concept art for that. He wanted someone who could draw science-fiction style art, and then he thought, 'Okay, well in Japan, who's the big guy who can draw science-fiction?'

Sakaguchi I felt we needed a very strong core visual for *Final Fantasy*, especially if we were to compete with *Dragon Quest*, which had Akira Toriyama, who was very famous. Amano wasn't on the same level as Toriyama at the time. Sure, he had a cult popularity among people like me, but he wasn't a mainstream star. Perhaps that gave me the confidence to phone him up.

Amano I was in Yokohama when the call came through. At that time, videogames weren't big at all. *Dragon Quest* was already out, but I wasn't really sure what games were all about. When people in the publishing world heard what I was doing, I met some strong opposition. "Why would you want to go and do something like that?" they'd ask. But we were all still young at the time. Sakaguchi was still in his 20s; I was in my 30s. I saw an opportunity to create something new, with emerging talent.



Yoshitaka Amano

Amano grew up in Shizuoka in central Japan. When he was 14 years old a friend invited Amano to visit him in Tokyo. Amano went, but instead of seeing his friend, visited the animation company Tatsunoko Productions instead. Amano showed Yoshida Tatsuo, the head of the company, his portfolio and he was offered a job on the spot. Amano left school and, between 15 and 30, worked at the studio as a character designer and animator. After Tatsuo died, Amano struck out on his own, and began to take on commissions for books and magazines, which is how he came to the attention of Hironobu Sakaguchi.

> "When the time came to pick which game to make, only three people voted for Final Fantasy"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

Sakaguchi I didn't give Amano much direction. I told him an outline of the plot – the fact there were crystals, the four elements and so on. I remember mentioning there was a bit of the story in the first half of the game where there would be a stone giant blocking the path, but not much more than that…

Amano After I received that original brief, I illustrated about six or seven pieces, including the poster that was used for the cover. The game was only about halfway complete, so I had to go off my imagination. In fact, there was a big misunderstanding because initially Sakaguchi showed me pixel art of one of the characters drawn on a piece of squared paper. I thought: "Oh, that's what he's looking for!" and went away and drew my own version on squared paper. He politely told me: "No, that's not what we're looking for." I remember that I was paid a huge amount for my work. The figure was one zero larger than what I was used to receiving for this kind of contract. ▶



Yoshitaka Amano claims that he was paid ten times as much as he'd ever received for a commission before to illustrate the front cover of the first *Final Fantasy*

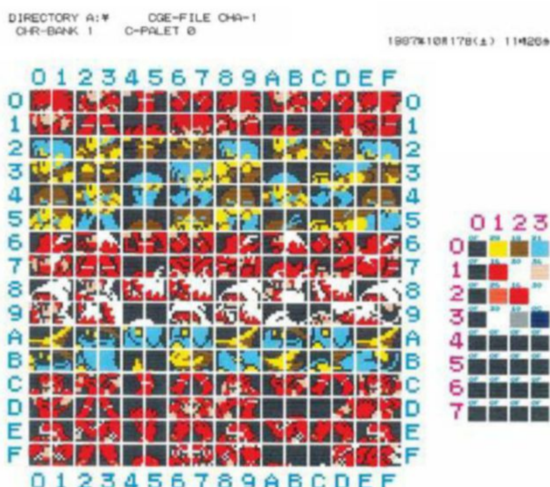
Sakaguchi Oh. I didn't know that! Wow. We were conned (laughs). No, he drew us so many pieces... it was worth it.

Amano I've never signed a retainer contract with Square Enix. From the beginning until now I've been freelance.

Sakaguchi Around that time I met with the head editor of Jump comics, Kazuhiko Torishima. He is a legendary editor, who has worked with and mentored many of Japan's best-loved comic-book writers. I showed him my plans for *Final Fantasy*, and he told me that we should give the characters more of a history and background. That's what we did from the fourth game onwards, but for the early games Dungeons & Dragons was our point of reference. D&D allows players to come up with their own backstories. So I decided to make the protagonists nameless, with no fixed roles or clear backstory. That's why we decided to make them orphans. Orphans fit the criteria.

Early into development I drew up a list of all the pieces of music we'd need for the game: the battle theme, the romantic theme, the dungeon music and so on. Somehow I forgot to write 'title music' on my list. But it's one of the most important parts of the game. You can't have a title screen without music! At the 11th hour I had to rush into Uematsu's office to ask him to compose something for the title screen.

Uematsu I remember it vividly. The game was being finished and Sakaguchi comes into my room and says: "I just need one more song for the game." I said, "OK, when do you need it?" He said: "Now. I need it right now." He had such a serious expression on his face I couldn't refuse him. He didn't give me any direction. Because I had so little time, I just used arpeggiated chords and a delay. There was no melody, and in my mind I imagined it being played on a harp. When I played it to



Kazuko Shibuya was, for the first decade of *Final Fantasy*'s history, tasked with translating Yoshitaka Amano's elegiac concept art into workable game sprites

"I told them that if we were only going to sell 200,000 units we should just give up"

Hironobu Sakaguchi

The four heroes were presented in silhouette on *Final Fantasy*'s title screen in order to save on precious memory. It was just one of many examples of where tight constraints led to ingenious and defining solutions





Sakaguchi I don't think he even reacted. It just went straight into the game. I had no idea this prelude would become so synonymous with the series.

Sakaguchi There was so little memory then. For the game ending, I decided we'd use a starfield, like travelling through space, so we could keep memory to a minimum. Each star was one pixel large. I actually showed the programmimg team the screensaver from the Macintosh, and told them to copy that. It ended up being one of the most effective scenes in the game.

We completed development in about ten months. I remember going into a local toy shop on launch day – there were no videogame stores at that time. I saw a glass case at the back of the shop and inside there were sitting five games, one of which was *Final Fantasy*. It was hugely affecting. The sales guys believed we would sell about 200,000 units. I told them that if we were only going to sell that many we should just give up. I wanted to push for 600,000. In the end they came to a compromise and we manufactured about 400,000 copies in the end. ▶





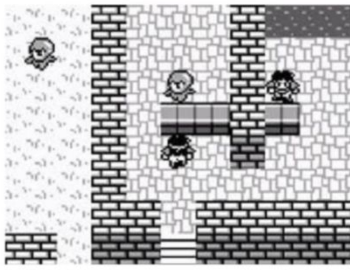
CHAPTER

III

Growing Pains

Uematsu At that time Square really didn't feel like a proper company at all. It was more like a student project. People would finish school in the day then roll up in the evening to work. I think Sakaguchi realised he couldn't do the job while studying. When *Final Fantasy* came out he was still at university, and I was engaged to be married and needed a stable job. I think we realised this could no longer be a student hobby for us all. We had to start making moves to become more professional.

Sakaguchi I'm not sure when I realised that the company had been saved. I never saw the financial numbers, so I wasn't sure where we stood. But a year after *Final Fantasy*'s release we got the second game out. After then I was sure we were safe.



When Kitase joined Square he was considered too inexperienced for *FF* and instead worked with other novices on *Final Fantasy Legend*, a game that, confusingly, is part of the *Seiken Densetsu* series



Amano's artwork was excised from the cover of the US version of *Final Fantasy*, the only one of the first three games in the series to enjoy a western release

Yoshinori Kitase



Yoshinori Kitase

Kitase studied 2D cel animation in the film studies department at Japan University after watching Star Wars and being inspired by the stop-frame animation work. After graduation, he joined a small animation company and created stop-frame animations for TV commercials and children's TV shows. After a while, Kitase saw that it would take him many years before he was in a position at the company to be able to direct his own projects, and so decided to switch careers. He saw an advertisement for a job at Square while browsing a game tips magazine in a shop.

I'd spent all day playing videogames while I was supposed to be applying for jobs in the industry. I got stuck on a game, so I went to a local bookshop and picked out a game magazine to find out what I needed to do. On the final page was a recruitment advert for Square. It wasn't very specific. I think it was only four lines long: "We are Square, and we are looking for people to help us make games."

A lot of game devs send in a sample of their work, or an idea for a game they want to make. I didn't have any of that, so I sent in a short film. It was a music video that I'd made at college using animated dancing robot pigs, inspired by Michael Jackson's Thriller video. That was enough to get me through the door. I heard later from Sakaguchi that the CEO of Square didn't like the video and didn't want to hire me. Sakaguchi thought it was interesting, though, and fought to get me in.

> "I heard later that the CEO of Square didn't want to hire me"
>
> **Yoshinori Kitase**

When I joined in 1990, Sakaguchi's *Final Fantasy* team was already quite large. I was assigned to make *Final Fantasy Legend* for the Game Boy. The differences between our team and the main team were stark. Other than the two directors, we were all complete newbies. We had very old-fashioned black-and-white Macs, while the 50-person main team was on colour machines.

Sakaguchi was already a star back then. There were rumours that he was going to become vice president. Because we were novices, our game became very delayed. I remember Sakaguchi scolding our team one day, which gave us the motivation to work harder.

Uematsu Prior to the Super Famicom I was so limited in the kinds of sounds I could create. I couldn't for example, make a flute sound. Then, when Nintendo announced the Super Famicom, suddenly we could have proper sampling in our games. To be honest, this technical development was instrumental in holding my interest in making game music. If things had continued the way it had been on the early games, I probably would have become very bored and gone on to try something else.

Sakaguchi When the Super Famicom launched it was a hugely exciting time. The hardware had improved hugely. We had Mode 7, a simulated 3D

Final Fantasy's job system, which delineates the roles of the characters that make up the party according to strength, magical ability and so on, has become a defining system within the series, at its best when a player is allowed to define those roles according to their preferred play style





technique, and you could try all kinds of things there. The number of colours vastly increased, and the sound palette too. We set out to use it well and figure out what we could do with this new technical capacity.

Uematsu Even though you had that limited sampling ability with the Super Famicom, it was still very inconvenient to produce a full-scale piece on these systems. There were so many limitations that you had to think carefully about how you could creatively draw out the best from the system, to make different kinds of pieces and effects. It was a challenge but, that said, human beings thrive under strict limitations in a lot of ways.

Sakaguchi Those limitations extended to the kinds of story and setting we could feature in our early games. With the Famicom games, we had to create a story within very limited environments using assets that could be reused easily. That framework forces you to consider carefully how you can surprise players and hold their interest. How can you create dramatic and interesting twists that won't require processing power or memory that we just can't spare?

That changed with *Final Fantasy IV* and the Super Famicom. Around that time, a very popular magazine, Shonen Jump, would feature a videogame each week in their pages. I became obsessed with getting a *Final Fantasy* game into that slot, especially because *Dragon Quest* had monopolised the space. I went as far as meeting with the editor, Kazuhiko Torishima, to ask him what we could do to be featured. He began to teach me about how to create deep characters and backstories, and what kind of supporting characters you'd need to help bring the protagonist forward in the drama.

The way it would work is that I'd show him my scripts and he'd point out all of the things that he disliked. I'd go away and rewrite the script and, eventually, he'd maybe point outside something that he thought was good. It was tough because I was essentially learning through criticism. Torishima has been instrumental in growing and mentoring some of Japan's best-known manga talents, so it was invaluable training. He basically taught me how to write stories.



Tetsuya Nomura

Tetsuya Nomura was born in Kochi on the island of Shikoku, three minutes from the sea, three minutes from the mountains and "surrounded by a wide, blue sky." He says he was drawing before he could walk; a picture of a lion that Nomura drew when he was three still stands on his parents' mantelpiece. At primary school Nomura would copy manga characters into his exercise books, and in middle school he began to design his own boardgames. Nomura's first videogame console was a Simple 10, a system that predates the Famicom, but despite enjoying its simple sports games, Nomura maintains that his only hobby growing up was drawing. At school, he worked a part-time job in a videogame store.

Tetsuya Nomura

I joined Square as a tester for *Final Fantasy IV*. The first time I'd heard about the series was when I was working at a toy shop part-time while in high school. The middle-school kids who visited the shop were excited about this game called *Final Fantasy* and they showed it to me on the shop's TV. I was originally planning on going into advertising design, but while I was at college I saw a recruitment ad from Square in a magazine. The advertisement had an illustration by Yoshitaka Amano next to it. I remembered my high-school art teacher suggesting that I go down the same route as Amano, so I decided to apply. I remember being told by my grandmother that you never get to do exactly what you want from the beginning in any job, so I thought that in the meantime, a job where I simply got to put Amano's art into videogames would be good.

Amano Each time work began on a new *Final Fantasy* I would receive a briefing about the characters involved: their names, their ages, and what kind of role they performed in the game. This all came as text, so it would be left up to me to imagine what the character or monster would look like.

Take Bahamut, for example. Now, Bahamut is a traditional monster from Greek legend. If you look at what a Bahamut is supposed to look like, it's this ugly, pig-like creature. I looked at that and thought, 'The name's great but the creature looks really odd, so perhaps I could draw a dragon instead.' Now, in Japan, whenever anyone hears the name Bahamut they think of it as a dragon, not the ugly pig-like thing from Greek myth. Likewise, I created Odin, one of the other summon monsters, from my imagination. Years later I was commissioned to draw the traditional Odin for a book of Norse mythology. When I went to look up what he was supposed to look like, all that came up were my own illustrations for *Final Fantasy* games.

"After I joined I didn't actually have my own desk for a while"

Tetsuya Nomura



Tetsuya Nomura only joined the company because he wanted to work with Yoshitaka Amano. Sakaguchi, recognising Nomura's talent, soon allowed him to begin creating character concept art of his own



ABOVE In the late 1980s Shonen Jump, one of Japan's most popular magazines, would feature a videogame each week. *Dragon Quest* routinely won the spot, and Sakaguchi became obsessed with supplanting it with *Final Fantasy*



LEFT Yoshinori Kitase was instrumental in implementing the use of the Super Nintendo's pseudo-3D Mode 7 technique. He employed the effect, not only for show, but also, in some scenes, for dramatic effect



Nomura The first time I met Sakaguchi was at my job interview. I was surprised that I was being interviewed by such an important person, as I recognised Sakaguchi from magazines. Once Square hired me I sent him a sketchbook filled with my monster and character designs. I remember him looking at some of the female characters I had drawn and saying: "Are these the kinds of girls that you like, then?" Those were his first words to me.

After I joined I was so junior that I didn't actually have my own desk for a while. There were four of us who had joined the company together, and we had to share one desk and one PC between us. The time that I joined the team was quite late in development, so I didn't really find any obvious bugs in *Final Fantasy IV*. You could pretty much play the game normally at that point.



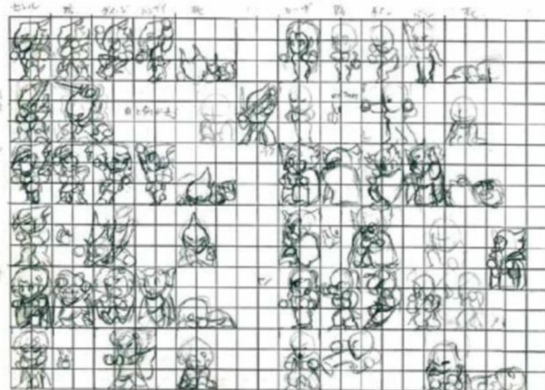
ABOVE *Final Fantasy IV*'s Cecil seen here in illustration, pixel portrait, and super deformed style. BELOW Square's artists would sketch out battle animations on paper before translating the movements into pixels

Sakaguchi Every time we made a *Final Fantasy* game all of our ideas would go into it. So when it came to making the next one we would have a completely clean slate. It's difficult to know what to do next. Thinking 'we will make a more exciting story' is too abstract. So we look at the mechanics and what we can do to develop that side of the game. Because we had advanced the characterisation so far in *Final Fantasy IV*, we decided to focus on mechanics for the fifth game.

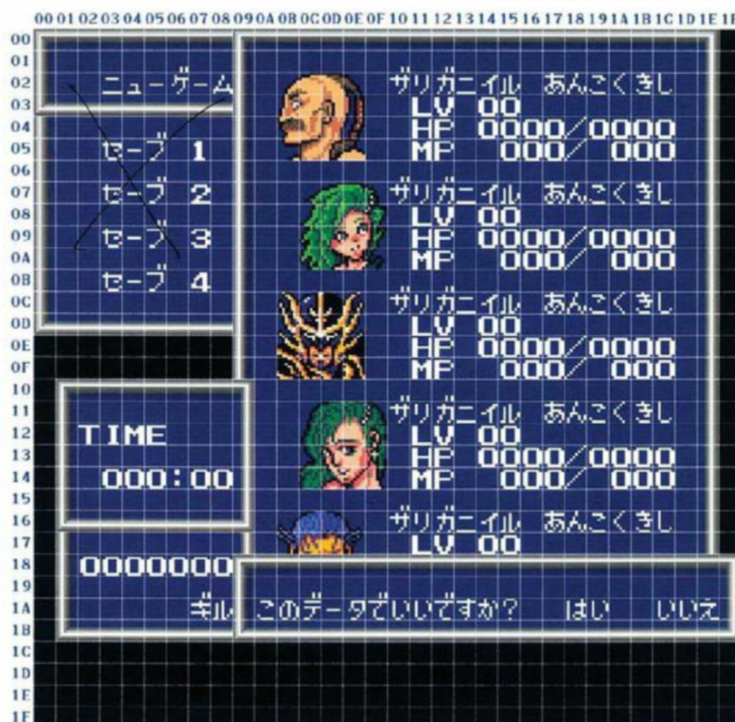
Characters and systems are like chalk and cheese, or water and oil. They often don't blend. In *Final Fantasy IV*, for example, Cecil's story is reflected in the mechanics as, through his internal struggles, he moves from being a dark knight to becoming a holy knight. With *Final Fantasy V*, however, by giving players more flexibility with the mechanics, allowing them to pick and choose whatever class they wanted to be, it became far harder to tell a deeply personal story.



ABOVE As a young man, Amano was influenced by the fine artists Gustav Klimt and Edvard Munch, and echoes of their style can clearly be seen throughout Amano's body of work







LEFT In many cases, Amano's designs for summonable monsters in the *Final Fantasy* games have come to define the classical mythical creatures on which they are based in the contemporary imagination. ABOVE An early, and never finished prototype of a character screen, with a series of alternate character portraits, some of which were not used in the commercial version of the game

Kitase Even though he was in charge of the entire project, management and generally leading development, at that time Sakaguchi still worked alongside the regular members of his team carrying out various programming jobs. He and I worked directly alongside each other on the scenario team for *Final Fantasy V*, splitting work programming the story scenes according to locations in the game.

He designed the opening scene, when you see the morning light come up and the king mount his flying dragon. When he showed us what he'd made it was an amazing moment. We went away and thought deeply about how we could make our sections better. He really led by example. He was my boss, a senior and important person in the company, and yet, in the day to day, we were immediate colleagues, splitting the workload, talking frankly about the problems of the day.

Sakaguchi If you don't do that kind of detailed, involved work then you don't get such a good idea about what the game you're creating is about. But if you're entering the data yourself, it's easy to see what you have to do behind the scenes. A game director might want, say, the lighting in a particular scene to be changed. But if they don't know how the lighting works, they don't understand the scale of the request, whether it's a big or small change. It's far better to understand the game you're making holistically. So I continued to work directly on programming right up until the seventh game, after which I stepped back and took more of a standard producer-level role.

Uematsu Up until about *Final Fantasy V*, the pay at Square was terrible. Programmers made a handsome living, of course, because they were seen as the most important guys. But the more creative roles – musicians and artists – did not. In truth, the pay was so bad that at one point I considered getting a part-time job at a convenience store. From *Final Fantasy V* onwards the upper management changed their way of thinking; they knew they had to reward the art and music guys as much as the programmers. My salary almost doubled overnight, which took the pressure off and meant I could even start to save a little.



Hironobu Sakaguchi continued to work as a programmer on the series through the Super Nintendo era. Kitase cites this early scene from *Final Fantasy V*, which Sakaguchi designed and shows a king flying off on a dragon, as a major influence on his own work

"The pay was so bad that I considered getting a part-time job at a convenience store"

Nobuo Uematsu

Nomura At that time, when we started development on a new *Final Fantasy*, all the staff would submit plans and proposals for the game. All the guys who had joined the company before me used PCs to create really clean and professional proposals, but I hand-wrote everything and filled my presentation with pictures. I think my studies of advertising design must have helped me there.

Sakaguchi would assign staff to projects by writing names on a white board, under all the different titles in production. It seems that Sakaguchi must have liked the character designs that I put into my proposals for *Final Fantasy V* because he made me an artist on that game. To be honest, I didn't really have time to feel any sense of elation because it was my first time in this kind of role and I had no idea how games were actually developed.



Amano remembers his artist father as being perennially dirty, a result of working in the medium of lacquer

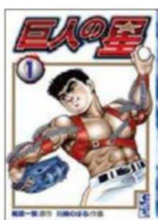
Kitase This was an exciting time to be in the company. We still had that major rivalry with *Dragon Quest* and we were incredibly motivated to beat their sales. *Dragon Quest V* and *Final Fantasy V* were in development at the same time. We didn't know which game would launch first. We were desperate to know about the themes and idea in their game and leaned on all kinds of industry contacts to try to find out what they were doing.

Sakaguchi I don't think we ever managed to get that much information via that kind of subterfuge – certainly never enough to be able to be reactive to what Enix was doing. I do remember, however, that in *Dragon Quest V* you had a choice of which girl you'd like to marry. It was an inspired piece of design. I remember telling my team that we absolutely wouldn't do anything like that. I was so eager to not copy their ideas.

Kitase The fact that *Final Fantasy* had made it to a fifth instalment was a major cause of celebration, of course. But there was a general saturation of fantasy RPGs in the market by that point. People were complaining there were too many of them around, so we felt redoubled pressure to introduce new ideas; things that were unexpected for players.

Sakaguchi When it came to starting work on the sixth game, I wanted to approach the story with an ensemble cast, partly to do something completely different for the audience. I first saw this kind of storytelling in Star Of The Giants, a sport-themed comic book in which the every member of the team becomes a lead character. I wanted to do something similar with a fantasy story, with lots of different characters that allowed people to root for different leads.

Kitase It was a much larger team on *Final Fantasy VI*. Sakaguchi was still involved in event creation, but his directorial responsibilities took up much more of his time. He left most of the groundwork down to me and the rest of the team. Again I was the scenario-planning guy, which meant it was my job to write and direct the cutscenes. To keep things fresh and interesting, I tried to add more of a 3D aspect to these interludes. For example, there is a scene where Daryl plunges to his death. I wanted to give players the sense of depth, of him falling into to the screen.



Hironobu Sakaguchi cites comic Star Of The Giants as a major influence on the decision to include an ensemble cast in *Final Fantasy VI*

There is one thing I regret about that game. One of its most famous scenes takes place at the opera. In the past there were mystery movies set in opera houses. That was the kind of spooky, opulent ambiance we wanted. Now, I had never been to the opera before I worked on that scene. I had to create it from my imagination, guessing what the opera might be like. Sakaguchi told me to go to the opera before I made that scene but I didn't. I wish I'd gone to get a better sense of the atmosphere before sitting down to recreate it.

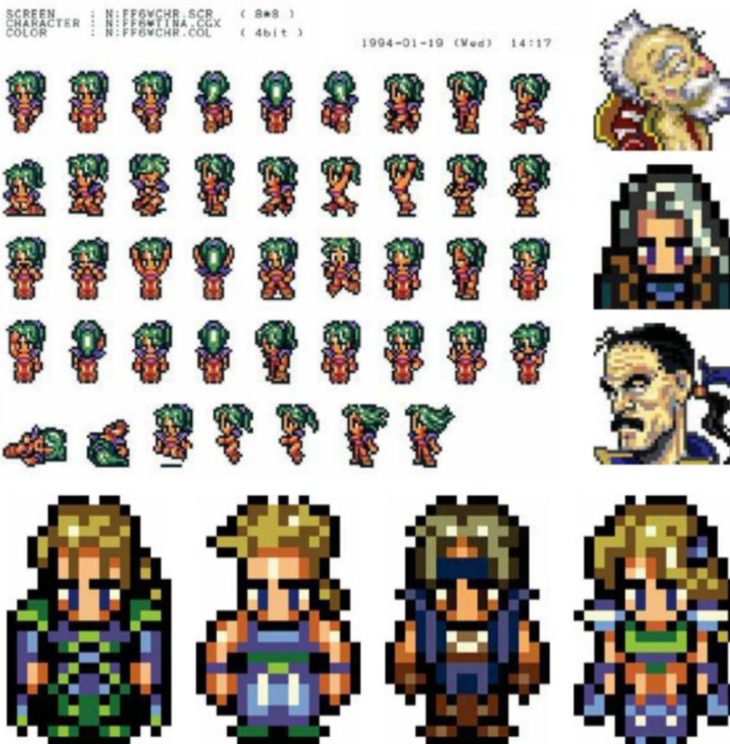
I based the look of the auditorium on London's Albert Hall. During the promotion of *Final Fantasy XIII* I had the chance to visit the Albert Hall for the first time. I remember looking around thinking, "Man, I should have come here before making that scene."



ABOVE Yoshinori Kitase based *Final Fantasy VI*'s famous opera scene on the Royal Albert Hall. Hironobu Sakaguchi urged his colleague to visit the opera before creating the scene, but Kitase regrets that he failed to make the time

Amano From the first game to the sixth I would create huge amounts of art for each title – maybe 30 to 40 pieces, including the logo, the general concept art and, of course, the individual character art. *Final Fantasy VI* was the last game for which I created so much material. The first character you meet in that game, Terra, or Tina, as she is called in the Japanese version, remains my favourite. I find her easy to draw.





Terra Branford (or Tina, as she is called in the Japanese version) took centre stage on most promotional art for *Final Fantasy VI*. This sprite sheet shows the range of emotions the pixel artists were able to communicate within tight limitations





CHAPTER IV

A New Dimension

Shinji Hashimoto

One night, after work at Bandai, one of my friends invited me to drinks and karaoke. Sakaguchi happened to be there. This was some time before we worked together. I remember he was a very good singer. Everybody in the game industry knew each other at that time.

Because, while at Bandai, I had worked with Yuji Horii and Akira Toriyama on *Dragon Ball*, when they started collaborating with Square on *Chrono Trigger*, I left to join them. My job was to manage the budget and the promotion, and I was also the guy who ran between Sakaguchi, Horii and Toriyama. Things haven't changed much: it's the same today with *Kingdom Hearts*. When I joined Square I was employee number 256. Today that's the number of people you have in just one of Square's 12 business divisions, which gives you an idea of how much we have grown since then.

Kitase Sakaguchi was involved in *Chrono Trigger* right from the start, while we were still making *Final Fantasy VI*. The game brought together the creators of *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, so it was an important project. But the project ran into lots of problems because it was being developed for lots of different platforms, some of which were experimental. The schedule had fallen behind, so I was pulled off *Final Fantasy VI* to help get things back on track. Once *Final Fantasy VI* was finished, Sakaguchi dedicated his full attention to *Chrono Trigger*, leading the battle-planning team, while I worked on the scenario.

Hashimoto *Chrono Trigger* is relevant because it was the first time that Square had really collaborated with external companies on a game. Prior to that, Sakaguchi had run everything internally. My job was to broker a lot of these collaborations with other studios and companies. A lot of games, such as *Front Mission* and *Treasure Hunter G*, came out of this new way of doing things and it established the role that I would take on *Final Fantasy VII*, when the switch from 2D to 3D polygonal graphics meant that we needed to find people who were able to do that kind of work.



Shinji Hashimoto

Shinji Hashimoto grew up in Niigata, on the northern coast of Japan. When he was ten, the town became the centre of a scandal following the kidnapping of Megumi Yokota, a 13-year-old girl, who was abducted by North Korea – an outrage that is still discussed today. Following the kidnapping, Hashimoto and his parents moved to Tokyo. While he was at university, Hashimoto became a freelance writer on TV and anime, and became an expert in Gundam. This led to a job at the toy manufacturer Bandai, where he worked on the Gundam line of toys. Through his job he came to know Yuji Horii and Akira Toriyama, the creators of *Dragon Quest*. When Horii and Toriyama collaborated with Hironobu Sakaguchi on *Chrono Trigger*, Hashimoto moved over to Square.



With more than 40 minutes of pre-rendered cutscenes, the decision to switch development platform from Nintendo's cartridge-based system to Sony's untested PlayStation was, as Kitase once put it, "made for them"

"My job was to broker a lot of collaborations with other companies"

Shinji Hashimoto







The Japanese-only release of *Final Fantasy VII: International* was sold with a bonus disc that features all of the game's 330 3D, pre-rendered locations for leisurely browsing



Sakaguchi I had always wanted to sell more games to the US market. I wanted to conquer it but nothing we tried ever worked. In the pixel-art era, RPG games had an image of being over-complicated. At the time they were seen as childish – something for children's cartoons. That all changed with *Final Fantasy VII*.

Approaching that era, it was clear that everything was going to move into 3D. We could see the future of videogames on the horizon, but we had no idea what a 3D RPG would look like. We created a demo of *Final Fantasy* in 3D with a small team of eight people working on silicon workstations that cost millions of dollars. We took that demo to CG shows, gathering information and figuring out what we'd need, power and capacity-wise, to make an entire game in that style. It was clear, looking at the Nintendo 64 and the PlayStation specification, that we'd need to move to CD-ROMs. That's what drove the decision to switch from Nintendo to Sony.

Hashimoto At that time Sakaguchi and I would often talk about why *Final Fantasy* didn't sell more games in the west. Maybe it was the unrealistic characters? He was also thinking about the benefits of CD-ROM compared to cartridges. It wasn't just the storage capacity that was an issue. If you needed to re-print a game that sold well, burning more discs was a lot easier and more affordable than manufacturing more cartridges.

Then, when we met with Sony, they were extremely eager to work with us. Kaz Hirai and Andrew House explained that *Final Fantasy* would be a key game for Sony, and they would put a lot of effort into the game's promotion. That hugely helped. Previously we'd always done everything under our own steam.

Sakaguchi We went to Los Angeles and visited an advertising agency there about how we could market the game in the west. Sony helped arrange the meeting and booked it in this downtown restaurant near Disneyland. I remember walking in and wondering why on Earth we were there.



The shift between the squat polygonal characters seen during play to the rangy, slick avatars on show in the pre-rendered movies jars in *Final Fantasy VII*

"I wanted to conquer the US but nothing we ever tried worked"

Hironobu Sakaguchi

Hashimoto Up until then our US branch had been based in Seattle, where Nintendo was based. When the decision was made to switch to Sony, we didn't need to be there any more, so I was quite involved in scouting out and setting up the Los Angeles office, which we still have now. Sakaguchi's sheer motivation and drive to get things done at that time was extremely impressive. It was a lot of fun to be around for that ride.

Kitase The memory available from CD-ROM was a huge thing for us. Memory had been so limited up until that point: every byte and bit was valuable. We would endlessly compress things just to make them as small as possible to fit on the ROM. But this process would often introduce bugs in the system. Back then it wasn't like now, where you have automated tools to tell you where the problems lay. So I remember seeing CD-ROM as representing freedom: we would finally be free of the process of compression and debugging. It was both exciting and liberating.

Uematsu When we started work on *Final Fantasy VII* I was very happy at the start: I thought, 'We really are free now, we can use music properly recorded in a studio.' I did some experiments to see how it would all work. It quickly became clear, however, that the higher the quality of music, the longer the load times. That seemed to me to be a major problem for a videogame; you can't make players wait for ages to play the game while it loads every scene. So I deliberately held back and used the internal sound generation of the PlayStation, rather than streaming recorded music.

But when I saw the finished game I realised the visuals were so deep and detailed that they had made the load times long anyway. I asked myself, "Why am I compromising when they aren't?" That's why, with *Final Fantasy VIII*, I used an orchestra and a choir for the opening piece of music (laughs). Was it the proper decision to prioritise sound quality over gameplay like this? Well, even now I am not sure it's right for a game company.



Tetsuya Nomura's concept art for *Final Fantasy VII* firmly pushed the series in a new direction which has been broadly followed ever since

Kitase The way *Final Fantasy VII*'s story was written is interesting. We split the responsibility between myself, Nomura and Kazushige Nojima. We would each take a week at a time to do a pass on the script. So I'd write a plot and then, after a week, pass it to the next guy. They'd then change bits, add scenes and tweak it to their tastes and ideas. In this way we took it in turns to build up the story.

We wanted the way the player related to the character to change. Up until that point there had always been a one-to-one equivalence between the player and the character in *Final Fantasy*. *Dragon Quest* games have always been like that too: the player is exactly the same person as the protagonist. We wanted to move away from that and have a side of Cloud that the player didn't see till later: you thought he was you, but then we pulled back the curtain and players could see that he was someone else. This was a way to play with, or break, the orthodoxy of RPG design. It had never been done till then, I don't think.

Nomura I actually started designing characters on *Final Fantasy VI*. But


SIDE







For Yoshinori Kitase, the lighter, more romantic tone of *Final Fantasy VIII* was chosen in response to the seriousness of the preceding game. Sakaguchi, however, was unconvinced by the changes

Sakaguchi was concerned that people were not aware it was me who had drawn the characters, so from *Final Fantasy VII* onwards he told me that he would put my designs to the fore. That is how the characters in that game came to be widely recognised by the public. Nothing really changed for me within the studio, though. If that kind of success had led to me being highly lauded by my colleagues, then I may have felt intimidated when coming to design new characters, but that didn't happen, so I felt just the same as before.



Feed the mysterious PuPu an elixir during battle and it will offer the player a rare card for *Final Fantasy VIII*'s Triple Triad card game – one that's impossible to find through any other means

Sakaguchi We had a feeling that this game was going to be special. In terms of the premise, it was something that I had been holding on to for some time. I had imagined the world years before, and its core themes about the way we treat the Earth, and the idea that, when we die, we turn into energy and are assimilated into the Earth and reborn somewhere else. I knew that this was the game where we would win or lose the war; so I decided to bring the world out.

The game's opening piece of music, Liberi Fatali, was played during the women's synchronised swimming event at the 2004 Olympics in Athens











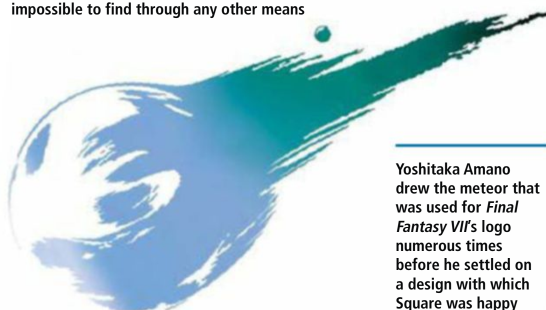




Kitase There wasn't any debate as to whether we should kill Aerith or not. Obviously the story writing was a collaborative effort, so we all agreed we wanted to go that way. I had a personal reason for wanting Aerith to die in that way. At the time the results of a survey had been published in which they asked children whether or not they thought people could come back from the dead. More than 50 per cent of children answered in the affirmative. Why is that? It must have something to do with fairytales: the idea that the princess dies and, with a kiss from the price, is revived. Likewise, in RPGs, players are often killed off then magically revived. I started to feel self-doubt about how people were extrapolating from fiction into reality. I wanted to get across with Aerith's death the idea of loss: the feeling you only realise the importance of people when they're gone, and you feel the loss and sadness.

Sakaguchi Part of the reason for Aerith's death was to answer the question, 'How can we surprise the player, shock them and show them something they've never seen before?' People see her die and expect her to be revived. The fact she isn't is memorable. It stays with people, and makes an impression.

Kitase In games, a character dies and everyone thinks she'll come back later, even more powerful than before. I wanted that weight of a death, and to make it feel real and proper. The reason we had Aerith die was not because I'd had experience with death; it more felt like a responsibility on our part. If children believed people came back from the dead because of our games, in some way, then we had a chance to change that perspective.



Yoshitaka Amano drew the meteor that was used for *Final Fantasy VII*'s logo numerous times before he settled on a design with which Square was happy

Amano With each new *Final Fantasy* game I am asked to create a subtle image to go behind the game's logo. I always draw these as a full picture, as a piece of art in their own right. With

some games it's an actual character, but with *Final Fantasy VII* it was a meteor. That was a hard one. (laughs) I can't tell you how many times I had to re-draw that meteor.

Kitase *Final Fantasy VII* was the turning point for the series. The visual style was based on the manga style and then we decided to go for a more realistic approach. There was a huge amount of passionate debate but, in the end, I believe it was the right decision. It put the series on the track it's taken ever since. Without that switch, I think *Final Fantasy XIV* and *XV* would have been very different games. After *Final Fantasy VII* came out, our rivalry with *Dragon Quest* changed. They didn't seem like rivals any more. We were now focused on competing with western games.

Sakaguchi I wasn't directly involved in *Final Fantasy VIII*. I left it to another team to develop and let them do what they wanted with it, and take it in their own direction.

Kitase There was a gear shift with the story in *Final Fantasy VIII*. I think it was to do with the seriousness of the previous game's theme. I promoted that approach. Because we'd had this heavy, deep story with *Final Fantasy VII* and Cloud's past and Aerith's death, I said: "Let's make things a little lighter and more cheerful now."

Amano It's the same for me. I always basically approach every game as if this will be the final one, and try and create something new and different than what's gone before, so it'll be completely different. For example, if the protagonist had a certain kind of hairstyle in one game, when I move onto the next one I try and do something in a completely different style. There will be connections, of course, but I always try to approach it as if it will be the last one in the series and make something final and unique.



Final Fantasy IX's ending was much argued over by the development team in Hawaii. In one interview, Sakaguchi claimed that it was changed no fewer than seven times





LEFT Sakaguchi designed *Final Fantasy IX* as a tribute to the traditional fantasy games in the series. ABOVE The cloak worn by Princess Garnet while escaping Alexandria is designed to resemble the White Mage's outfit from the original *Final Fantasy*

"With every game I try and create something new and different than what's gone before"

Yoshitaka Amano

Kitase Fan feedback definitely informed our approach with *Final Fantasy VIII*. For example, we were often asked why characters received money for killing monsters. People thought it was strange, which is a valid criticism. So in *Final Fantasy VIII* you don't get money from beating the monsters; instead you receive a salary that's paid directly into your account at regular intervals. Likewise, this is what informed the decision to start the game in a high school, a more upbeat location.

Sakaguchi To be honest, when I heard their idea to write the game like a high-school drama I was concerned. But having told them they could go in their own direction, I couldn't very well take it back.



The original western versions of *Final Fantasy VII* erroneously used the first name 'Aeris' for Aerith Gainsborough. Since the mid-2000s, however, English translators have standardised the use of 'Aerith', as Japanese writers intended

Kitase When Sakaguchi first saw the demo at the school, and a realistically proportioned human character, he said to me: "Hmm, that looks okay, but might you consider doing it with more deformed characters?" He believed that is what the series should look like. I considered what he said, but ended up sticking to my guns.

Sakaguchi Because of the approach they took with that game, I pulled the rudder hard back the other way with *Final Fantasy IX*. I wanted to go right back to the beginning of the series, with a traditional fantasy story: knights, castles and so on. I figured that would calibrate and restabilise the series, somehow.

Kitase I wasn't involved in *Final Fantasy IX* because Sakaguchi and a new team that we had established in Hawaii were making it in parallel to *Final Fantasy VIII*. Part of the reason it looks the way that it does is because we had a big debate about the art style on the PlayStation. The debate centred around whether we should keep the manga-style, deformed characters of the sixth game, or aim for a more realistic approach and develop in that direction. In the seventh and eighth games the new direction won out, but Sakaguchi really wanted to do a classic-looking game on the new technology, which is where *Final Fantasy IX* came in.

CHAPTER

V

End of an Era



Hashimoto The trio of PlayStation games we made provided a high boost to the company. They enriched our lives: we moved to better offices in Meguro, we got new computers and lots more staff were joining. But Sakaguchi was always looking for what was going to be the next big thing. He came to strongly believe that an online revolution was coming. Because of that, we set up our PlayOnline project, a portal for online gaming. This was the impetus behind what would become the company's first MMO, *Final Fantasy XI*.

The actual development of *Final Fantasy XI* was handled in Honolulu in Sakaguchi's studio there. I spent my time running around Japan brokering deals to get smaller games onto the PlayOnline service, to help support *Final Fantasy XI*. There were so many projects on the go at that time. I think, at one point, *Final Fantasy IX*, *X*, *XI*, *XII* and the *Final Fantasy* film were all concurrently in development at the studio. It was an extremely hectic time. That's when I started hearing the rumours that Sakaguchi was going to leave the company.

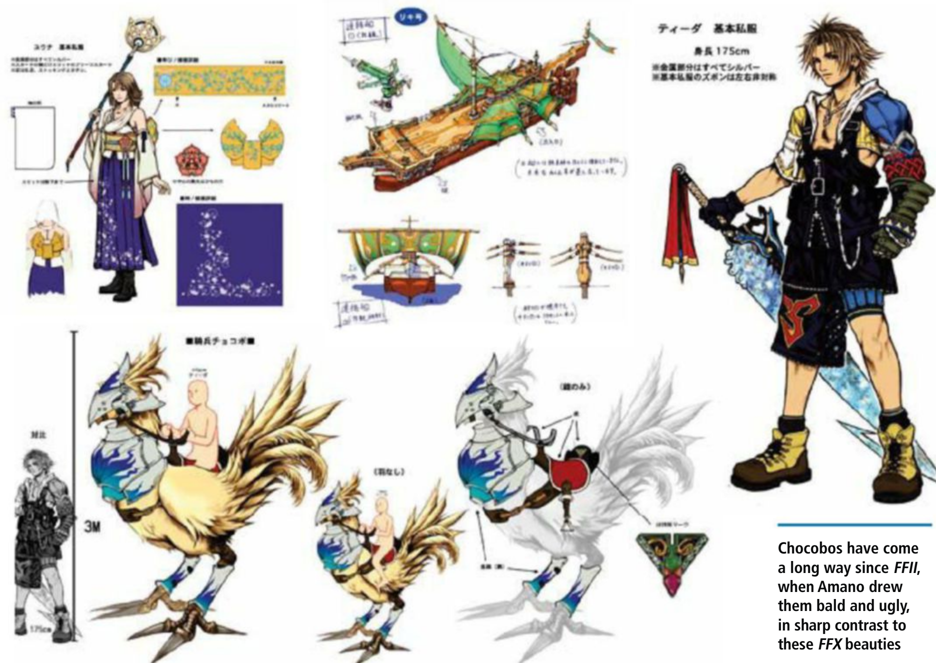


2001's CGI folly, Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within, was famous among animators at the time for being one of the first CG films to reportedly render and animate individual strands of hair. It remains the most expensive videogame-inspired film ever made

> "I had a feeling that maybe we could make a film together"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

Sakaguchi With *Final Fantasy VII* we had a huge number of CG experts join the company. We didn't train up the old Square staff, but instead gathered a very skilled team from across Japan. They made the cutscenes in PlayStation games. Now, these people weren't originally games guys; they were CG specialists, and their goals and dreams were to work in film. I had a feeling that, because we had this talent in the company, maybe we could make a film together. So I got together the team and some people from Hollywood and started looking at possibilities. We decided to make it in Hawaii because it's equidistant to Japan and North America. Also, the local Hawaiian government was supportive about getting visas. If you had tried to take 150 Japanese staff to Hollywood to work on a film project, you'd never get the visas. But everything started coming together, and I decided we should take a chance.

Kitase People look at *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* and think it has little to do with the games. That's incorrect. While Nomura, Nojima and I wrote the plot for *Final Fantasy VII*, there was in fact an earlier script for the game that Sakaguchi had written by himself. Lots of the concepts from that document made it into the game, but the actual original plot formed the basis of the script for the movie. People look at the film and think it's pure sci-fi. But when I see the film, I can see a lot of the



Chocobos have come a long way since *FFII*, when Amano drew them bald and ugly, in sharp contrast to these *FFX* beauties

kind of things he wanted to do with *Final Fantasy VII*.

Sakaguchi The reason I decided to leave Square Enix was related to the film's performance, of course, but that's not the sole reason. From around *Final Fantasy VII* onwards I stopped being involved in the programming work and moved more into production and business management. My job continued moving in that direction and I started thinking that this wasn't the reason I joined the industry. So when the film project was such a massive failure it was a good chance for a reset that would allow me to get back to the things I wanted to do in the game industry.

Kitase As a business venture, yes, it was a failure, but as an entertainment company you have to try out new things. You don't want to be a company that is so scared of failure that you never try anything new or interesting.





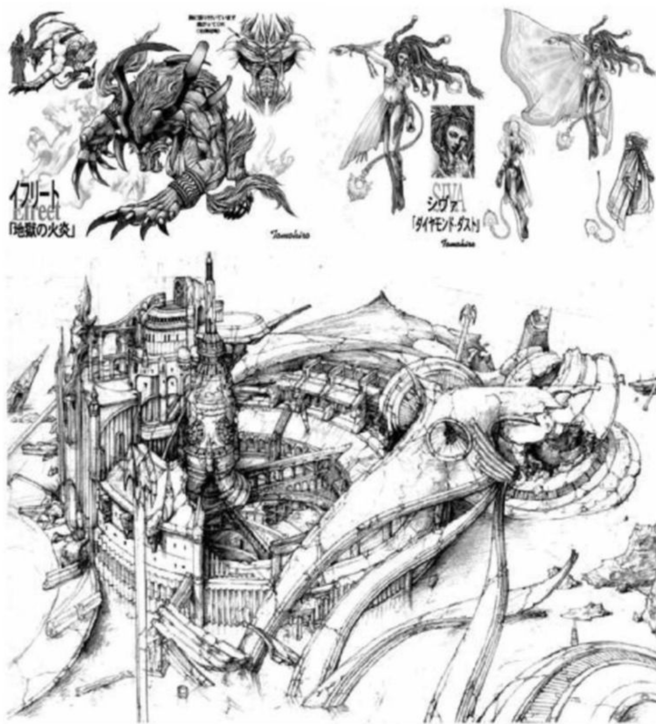
The child Tidus in *Final Fantasy X* was played by Cree Summer, the actor who also voiced Penny in the original Inspector Gadget cartoons

"Sakaguchi's departure was like Aerith's death. One day he just wasn't there any more"

Yoshinori Kitase

Hashimoto When I heard the rumours, I called Sakaguchi to ask whether it was true that he was leaving. I still remember when I first heard it from his lips. It was terrifying. The business had expanded so much in such a short time and I was hugely concerned that we were about to lose the guy at the top of it all. Initially the plan was that he would keep supporting Square as part of an outside company, which slightly put my mind at rest. But that didn't quite happen, and keeping stable with such changes happening became a huge challenge.

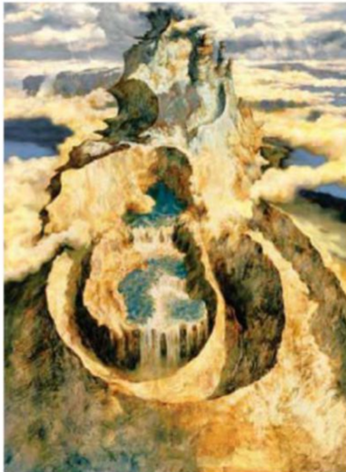
Kitase I've since heard, second hand, that Sakaguchi said that he handed responsibility for the *Final Fantasy* series over to me when he left. That's very flattering, of course, but at the time it wasn't as if there was an official parting speech or handover of the reins. In lots of ways Sakaguchi's departure was like Aerith's death in *Final Fantasy VII*. One day he just wasn't there any more.





FFX was certainly a game of contrasts. Above is the original hand-drawn concept for the Yevon Dome in Zanarkand; next to it are insignias for the game's assortment of blitzball teams









ABOVE ***Final Fantasy XI Online*, released in mid-2002 in Japan, was the first MMORPG to offer cross-platform play between PC and PlayStation 2.**
BELOW ***Final Fantasy XI*'s players could customise their character across one of five races, choosing gender, face, hair colour, size, job, and national allegiance**









Final Fantasy XII's original director Yasumi Matsuno cast the older character Basch as the game's protagonist. This was later changed to promote the more youthful (and irritating) Vaan to the lead role





"Sakaguchi is like a kid: someone who is pure and honest"

Nobuo Uematsu

There wasn't really a period of grieving, but it was immediately obvious in his absence what a strong hand he had kept on the tiller, and the fact that he was a very strong leader, not just of *Final Fantasy* but of the entire company. There was a void there left by him, which we had to get used to.

Uematsu I continued to work at the company for about two years after Sakaguchi left. It wasn't so much out of a sense of loyalty to Square so much as the fact that, after Sakaguchi left, it started to get boring without him around. Lots of people say lots of things about Mr Sakaguchi but, for me, and other people who know him well, he is like a kid: someone who is pure and honest and who follows what he finds interesting. He is wonderfully straightforward in that way.



While Sakaguchi was at Square Enix the company followed in that mould. We made games that we found interesting and exciting. That's what we chased. Sure, we had to think strategically from a business perspective, but after Sakaguchi left money seemed to become the highest priority. The first question was always, "What will sell?" That attitude made me lose interest, a little.

Hashimoto I remember it wasn't just Sakaguchi who left. Lots of the higher-ups followed, which caused a lot of trouble for us in terms of how we were going to run the business. We didn't want to cause trouble for our fans and business partners in the industry. It was hugely worrying. How were we just going to keep going? Money was also a big problem. We had expanded too much, and our outgoings were so high, that money was very tight. We had to think carefully about which titles we were going to focus on. The early 2000s were a difficult time to get through.

Nomura It's not as if I consciously decided to stick around myself after Sakaguchi left. I am always handling multiple projects at once, so there is never a convenient time to pull out. Also, I'm aware that whenever I would hypothetically choose to leave the company it would cause trouble for somebody, and that has resulted in me staying, more than any conscious decision to do so.

Kitase As a product, I don't think *Final Fantasy XII*'s direction was influenced by the absence of Sakaguchi. But it's probably fair to say that with the changeover from PlayStation 2 to 3, we had to spend a lot of time building the basic engine. That took far longer that we had estimated. You needed a lot of staff assigned, and in order to do that we had to move people around in the company, and squash smaller games in order to get the staff together. Sakaguchi was very good at bringing a team together. He was very blunt and direct, but also very powerful in his ability to move people around to just the right place. If he had been in charge he would have got the development together in a much more efficient way.

Hashimoto We struggled as the technology was changing. We lacked the experience with PlayStation 3 and to be frank, our adoption of that machine was well behind the curve.



ABOVE *Final Fantasy XII* director Yasumi Matsuno was one of Hironobu Sakaguchi's protégés, and also helmed superb spin-off *Final Fantasy Tactics*



CHAPTER

VI

Disaster and Reconciliation

Naoki Yoshida

When the merger between Square and Enix happened in 2002, there may have been a sort of awkward feeling, because a lot of external people came into the company, myself included. People who were on the Square side, making *Final Fantasy* in-house, may have felt a little strange having a lot of people coming in from the outside.

I'd worked with the *Dragon Quest* series for about five years, and joined the *Final Fantasy XIV* project after 1.0 had launched. Honestly speaking, when 1.0 was going through its testing phases, I heard from outside sources that the game was horrible. But I thought, at that time, because we had *Final Fantasy XI*, which was a very successful MMO for Square Enix, maybe it was just that the players were comparing it to that. Perhaps it was suffering by comparison. Besides, MMO launches are never smooth to begin with. That was the feeling that I had, not being part of the project yet.

But when 1.0 fully launched, there was so much negative backlash around the world that the company began to scramble to find out what had gone wrong. A team of developers were assigned to investigate the situation. For example, the company asked Hiroshi Minagawa, who was directing *Final Fantasy XII* at the time, to look at user interface. Yoshihisa Hashimoto, who was CTO during that period, was asked to look at the battle system. We assigned Mr Hiroshi Takai, who was a VFX artist who worked on the *SaGa* series and *Final Fantasy V*, to go in and investigate what was wrong with the launch of version 1.0.

That team would often consult with me, even though I wasn't a part of the investigation at that stage. At night, they'd ask: "What should we check next?" It may have been that those people trusted me as a game developer, and a game director, to provide advice. But I was kind of working on the game on a volunteer basis at that point. Around mid-October in 2010, I consulted with our CEO at the time, Yoichi Wada, and I told him, "We're in very bad shape. It's an emergency. We can't just install a couple of people to fix everything; we're in a very grave situation." I tried to bring it up with the upper management.

At that time, I was about to embark on a new project. The CEO thought, 'Well, we can handle this with the current *Final Fantasy XIV* team; we don't want you to go over there.' The CEO made the decision that I wasn't necessary. I wasn't happy to hear that so I fought back. I said, "Okay then. Never talk to me about *Final Fantasy XIV* again. If you think the problem can be solved with a Band-Aid patched on top of it, don't talk to me about it ever again." He was not happy to hear me say that, but he didn't get angry at me.

Of course, the development team continued to consult me. They were very hard-working about it. I loved the fact that those developers were still working very hard, and I wanted to support them. So I continued to assist for about a month, but the game's condition continued to deteriorate. I remember it very clearly to this day. On November 26, 2010, at 4am, the CEO officially asked me: "Could you please handle matters on *Final Fantasy XIV*?" I said, "Well, if you insist, then I'm willing to help."

At that time I had two objectives. Firstly I just wanted to think about what, starting from a blank slate, a *Final Fantasy* MMO would look like. I also wanted to take the 1.0 version ▶



Naoki Yoshida

Naoki Yoshida joined Hudson Soft in 1993 where he worked on the *Bomberman* series. He joined Square Enix 11 years later to lead the *Dragon Quest: Monster Battle Road* series. An avid MMO fan, Yoshida was taken off *Dragon Quest X* to work as a consultant on the troubled *Final Fantasy XIV*. He saw that the root of the game's issues lay in its team's obsession with graphical fidelity. At a talk in 2014, Yoshida pointed out that, in the original *Final Fantasy XIV*, a single flowerpot contained around 1,000 polygons and 150 lines of shader code, "the same amount as the entire player-character model."





ABOVE The original version of *Final Fantasy XIV* was indisputably the company's greatest failure to date. **BELOW** Yoshida's revival of *Final Fantasy XIV* has been incredible; the game is now considered to be one of the best long-term MMOs on the market

> "I said, 'Okay. Never talk to me about Final Fantasy XIV again'"
>
> **Naoki Yoshida**





Final Fantasy XIII controversially dropped towns from the game, a much-criticised decision that left players to pursue the drama along long, linear pathways

of the game and do a thorough investigation to determine where its issues lay. Was it technology, or game design? Was it our asset pipeline? Just to see what our ideal looked like, and what our current situation looked like.

In order to do those two things, I realised there was something else I needed to do: give the development team a break. There had been such a negative response to the first incarnation of the game that it had affected the developers. Not only were they tired physically, but they were also under such mental stress. So to find the motivation and the strength to revamp the game, they needed time off. The other reason was that if we were to just continue developing at this pace without a break, I anticipated the team would come back with a lot of questions. 'What do we need to do next?' So many questions that there wouldn't be enough time to do our research on what was wrong. So by having them out of the way, so to speak, it gave me the time to do those two things I mentioned earlier.

We had about three weeks to do it. I would primarily handle the creation of my ideal *Final Fantasy* MMO, while my core team did the thorough investigation of 1.0. On December 28, I received the results of their work. It was night-time, and we were going through it, looking at the things they'd found.

It was very bad. So bad I ran a fever. I went into New Year's break looking at the results of their investigation, comparing it to my ideal *Final Fantasy* MMO, and spent the break looking at what needed to be fixed or updated, and setting some goals.

When comparing the two, the conclusion that I reached was that there was no way to fix *Final Fantasy XIV* unless we rebuilt the game from scratch. Even if we were to continue version 1.0 and try to fix it, adding content as we went along, the server structure itself was very poorly set up. I projected it would have had to shut down after three years, even if we tried to fix it. The server structure was just horribly messed up; it was not planned as a long-term operation.

Hajime Tabata

In 2012 I took a phone call from our previous CEO, Yoichi Wada. He told me that there was a great deal of trouble with *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, a separate project to *Final Fantasy XIII*. He told me that he was considering whether or not to cancel the project. If he did, he said, then he'd want to really start it up from scratch again and take it off in a new direction, and maybe have me take on that project.

There are problems with every videogame project, of course. But with *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* the period of trying to fix the issues just went on way too long. It had already been in development for six years by that point. It couldn't carry on in the same way. That was when I became involved and started to change the project towards becoming *Final Fantasy XV*.



Hajime Tabata

Hajime Tabata grew up in Sendai, in the north of Japan. As a child he dreamed of being a professional athlete. He studied economics in Tokyo, not through a particular interest in the subject, he says, but because he had the necessary exam results. Subsisting on a student diet of ramen and videogames, initially Tabata wanted to create recipes for instant ramen. While interviewing for jobs in various professions during his final year of study, Tecmo was the first company to offer Tabata a job after he left a memorable impression on the company's idiosyncratic founder, Yoshihito Kakihara, by giving him a sturdy massage during the final interview. During his time at the company, where Tabata was employed as a game designer, his responsibilities ranged from issuing apologies to Nintendo, to listening to irate customers' complaints on the phone.

Yoko Shimomura

Final Fantasy Versus XIII was the first *Final Fantasy* game that I composed music for. Because it was a spin-off game there wasn't the pressure I might have felt with a numbered [mainline] game. It was a gentle way in, although of course the game then morphed into a mainline title.

When the game changed to *Final Fantasy XV* it was a big moment for me. Some of the pressure was mitigated by the fact some of the music I had written for *Versus XIII* had already been accepted. Had I been asked to start again from scratch it may have been far more intimidating. About a third of the music I wrote for *Versus XIII* made it into *XV*.

Hashimoto Everyone was doing what they thought was right with these projects. Nobody was deliberately trying to grind the company into the dirt. But there are some things where the problem only becomes clear once the games take shape. Sometimes you only realise where you've gone wrong after the work is finished.

Tabata I didn't actually say "Yes" straightaway to the offer. I took it to my team and we discussed it all. In actual fact, about 90 per cent of the team were opposed to taking it on.

There was a lot of antipathy, because my team didn't want to merge with Tetsuya Nomura's, and they knew about the snags the project had encountered.

It took about six months to reduce resentments and take control. Creating a team where we could all work together and be on the same page when we entered the pre-production stage for *Final Fantasy XV* was crucial, so I paid a lot of attention to making sure the team integrated well and worked together. I even gave a motivational speech.

We pulled a number of different ideas for the final form the game might take, and we split the department up into several teams, and they all came up with ideas that we put together and then presented to each other. The two core concepts that came out of that were the idea of comrades, and the idea of a journey. That helped us work out the systems and structures of the game. Then we split into different teams and worked on different mock-ups. It was a very useful period actually, because not only was it a team-building exercise in itself, but it also helped focus the direction of the project.

At the start, I had quite a top-down style of management to get things back on track. Someone had to make firm decisions, otherwise

> "The period of trying to fix the game's issues went on way too long"
>
> **Hajime Tabata**



The full story of what happened to Tetsuya Nomura's *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, the ill-fated project that turned into *FFXV*, remains shrouded in secrecy. We tried



The sight of driveable cars and licensed real-world brands in *Final Fantasy XV* may seem to betray the series' roots – it was originally based on Dungeons & Dragons – but the close-knit four-character party has an obvious connection with the earliest games in the series

people would have this very fuzzy understanding of where we were headed. But as the project started getting on track and gaining momentum, we moved into a secondary phase where individual sub-teams could have their own vision and work a bit more autonomously. There was a definite shift in style there.

Shimomura There were some clear differences between the two directors. With Nomura it took much longer to get the okay on a new piece of music. He would think very deeply about the piece, and often request changes. But once he told me that he was happy with a piece there would be almost no changes thereafter. Tabata, by contrast, often gave the green light very quickly, but would then require more and more changes at a later date. They have different ways of working that reflect their personalities; both present their distinctive challenges.

Sakaguchi After moving away from Square Enix there was a need to remove my influence from the *Final Fantasy* series for various reasons. I'd started a new studio with Mistwalker, and there was a risk people would want to follow me from Square. As such, the CEO at the time wanted to remove any influence I had from the series. There was a long period where I stayed away. That changed with the arrival of the new CEO, Yosuke Matsuda. His thinking is different. He acknowledges that I am the creator and the originator of *Final Fantasy* and could see that, from a promotional point of view, it would be good to have me on board again to send a positive message. That was about the time *Final Fantasy XV* was in development. Masuda introduced me to the director, Tabata, and we had dinner together. It was the first time we'd met.

Tabata We spoke at length and Sakaguchi had some critical points to bring up, which he shared. He always has a lot more to say when he's drunk. I have to take him out properly if I really want to get some information out of him.

Sakaguchi He said to me that night: "In my team we believe that a *Final Fantasy* game is a place to try new things." This guy, I thought to myself, he says some good things. Maybe I can get on board with him?

Tabata At that first meeting Sakaguchi told me that I could ask him anything I wanted. So I said: "How much money do you have?" And he replied: "You can ask me anything but that."

Sakaguchi So you see, while there was a long dark period, I am now allowed to talk pretty freely to *Final Fantasy* people. When I set off on my own path, *Final Fantasy* seemed to follow me around; it almost felt like a burden. But I've been making games away from Square for about 15 years and it's better now. It's a little like if your daughter gets married to a man you really can't stand. And then they have a grandson together and he's cute and it brings you back together. That's kind of how I feel about *Final Fantasy* now.

Tabata One of the big things in doing a project like this – a numbered *Final Fantasy* game, such a big part of the overall business strategy for the company – is that you really do come to realise how all the different departments in the company are supporting a project. People who aren't involved at all in the actual development of the game, how they're involved was something that really struck me.

Also, the way that the difficulty level of developing a project just expands so rapidly when it becomes a project of that level. To meet the needs of the fans, and give them what they want, is always going to be a hard thing, whatever level you're working at. But when you're moving onto the higher technical level, the scope of the project becomes so much more difficult. It's as if you're making a toy rocket, for example, and then moving on to make a much more professional, proper rocket – the technology, the level of detail and design that is involved in that, is just so much higher.

I had dinner with Naoki Yoshida, the director of *Final Fantasy XIV*, a little while back, and we were discussing our experiences of our two respective projects. What we both came to agree on very quickly, and a dilemma that both myself and he seemed to have, was how a lot of people in the company don't seem to understand how hard making a top-level triple-A game using current technology is. We really were talking about the best way to get more people in the company to understand that.

Hashimoto I trust these new guys. It's far better to have them in charge rather than the older generation.



Yoko Shimomura.

Yoko Shimomura graduated from the Osaka College of Music in 1988 and was offered a job as a piano teacher in a local music store. An avid player of videogames, before accepting the job, Shimomura sent some of her compositions to Capcom, which offered her a job as a composer. At Capcom Shimomura composed the music for 16 games including, most famously, *Street Fighter II*. In 1993 she applied for a job at Square, not only because of the company's reputation for making RPGs, which she loved, but also because she didn't know anyone there, so she could never be accused of having simply benefited from nepotism. Shimomura worked at Square for nine years, before going freelance. Her first work on a *Final Fantasy* game was on *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, the troubled project that eventually was turned into *Final Fantasy XV*.





I know that now the series is in safe hands. I have done nine games in the *Final Fantasy* series, and there have been ups and downs, but I'm very happy that we have made so many games under my watch.

Amano Even after Sakaguchi left, Square Enix continued. And looking at the series after his departure, I can still sense this ongoing energy. I think that comes from the next generation: those people who grew up playing *Final Fantasy* are now the people who are creating it. That power, and that continuing love, imbues this tradition with new energy.

Uematsu I really like what the new composers on the series are doing. Hitoshi Sakimoto, Yoko Shimomura; they are such a good fit, especially for the more modern games. These are supremely high-quality musicians, and have an approach that works much better than what I could produce.

ABOVE Hajime Tabata held consultations with fans throughout the development process of *Final Fantasy XV* to ensure that the game did not alienate its core audience with its new, sometimes daring diversions **RIGHT** *Final Fantasy VII Remake* was originally outsourced, but the project was recently brought back in-house



> "Final Fantasy seemed to follow me around; it's almost a burden"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**



In 2016 Koichi Iishi, designer of the original line-dancing style of *Final Fantasy* combat, met Hajime Tabata at a game show. "It was humbling to hear him say that he was glad to see us creating a *Final Fantasy* game that people are interested in all these years later," Tabata says

I'm so grateful for my work with Square, though. Thinking back, as someone who never studied music formally, it's almost like Square Enix was my music school. They gave me 20 years where I could learn to play music and how to compose. What's more, I didn't have to pay any tuition fees.

Sakaguchi Nobuo and I often talk about what might have been different if we had taken a different direction with the seventh game and, instead of going down a more realistic route, had continued in the classic style. How might it have evolved and, crucially, what might have been retained that, I think, was lost somewhere in the later games? It's not about one approach being better than the other. It's about the style of play. It's just different. In the old 2D *Final Fantasy* games you'd look in every gap and nook and cranny for secrets. In 3D games there doesn't seem to be the same need or desire to explore.

Kitase With the [forthcoming] remake of *Final Fantasy VII*, we get a lot of people applying to join the team from other companies. When we talk to these candidates they often say that *Final Fantasy VII* was the game that made them want to join the industry. It's so motivational to hear that. Something we created unlocked this deep desire in other people. Moreover, I can look back on my career and see the way in which the *Final Fantasy* games are linked to people's personal history and experiences. People associate different games with different moments in their lives. Making that impact on the culture is astonishing to me.

Sakaguchi Every time we made a *Final Fantasy* game, we'd all get together and review the project in a debrief meeting. Together we'd watch the game's ending and toast champagne. We had all put so much energy into this thing, so it was an emotional moment. I remember every single one of those closing parties, and that extraordinary feeling of having made something together. That, I will never forget. ■

THE MAKING OF...



UNDERTALE

Conflict, comedy and creature comforts: how a rule-breaking debut became an unexpected phenomenon

By Chris Schilling

Format PC, PS4, Vita
Developer/publisher Toby Fox
Origin US
Release 2015

Toby Fox was almost two-and-a-half years old in March 1994, the month **Edge**'s infamous *Doom* review was published. Outwardly, there would seem to be little to connect those two facts. But to play *Undertale* is to find a game that seems to have spawned from the same line of thinking as that oft-misquoted conclusion: "If only you could talk to these creatures, then perhaps you could try and make friends with them, form alliances… Now, *that* would be interesting." Indeed, when Fox was looking to raise funds to continue the development of *Undertale*, the modest description he chose for the Kickstarter page posited it as 'a traditional roleplaying game where no one has to get hurt.' In truth, his game was anything but traditional, although he got the second part right. You can befriend, rather than fight, the game's bosses. For once, you *can* talk to these creatures.

The ironic twist is that the first seeds of *Undertale* were sown from conflict, growing from a battle system Fox had programmed in GameMaker Studio. In fact, his initial inspiration for this early experiment came while he was casually browsing Wikipedia. "One day, I randomly read about arrays, and realised I could program a text system using them," he tells us. "So I decided to make a battle system using that text system, which in turn gave me many ideas for a game. Then I decided to make a demo of that game – to see if people liked it, and if it was humanly possible to create."

Undertale's combination of turn-based combat and realtime elements had plenty of antecedents, though it has more in common with another genre entirely, with danmaku shooter series *Touhou Project* an inspiration. "I wanted to do something different from what I was already familiar with," Fox says. "I mean, something novel is generally more interesting to people than something they've seen before. Also, bullets offer more variety in movement than simple button presses." Rather than study any particular games to get an idea of rhythms and patterns, it was an iterative process: he'd adjust his self-created designs until the encounters felt challenging but fair. The latter was vital: Fox didn't want *Undertale*'s combat to be considered 'bullet hell', since he'd used fewer and larger projectiles to make it more approachable. "*Undertale* was made with the understanding that those types of games are generally too intimidating for most players. Maybe it could be called 'bullet heaven' or 'Bullet Hell Jr'," he suggests.



Certain choices you make are persistent, crossing over into subsequent playthroughs. Indeed, the game's Pacifist ending can only be reached after first completing a Neutral run

At the time, Fox had precious little game-development experience, though he was familiar with RPG Maker, having built *Earthbound* ROM hacks during his time at high school. It's impossible not to see some of Shigesato Itoi's SNES adventure in *Undertale*, though Fox says the game is so close to his heart that it's hard for him to determine which elements of his game were or weren't inspired by it. "I can definitely say that I wanted to make something that had as much emotional power, humour and wonder as the *Mother* games, while not necessarily taking the same paths to achieve it," he says. "Also, the main character is a kid wearing a striped shirt… that's probably too obvious."

> "I PLAYED EARTHBOUND WHEN I WAS FOUR YEARS OLD. IT TRANSFORMED MY BRAIN FOREVER"

Either way, the impact it had upon him at an impressionable age is clear. "I played *Earthbound* when I was four," he says. "I was so young that it helped me learn to read, and also transformed my brain forever." Seven years on, his affection would blossom into obsession when he started visiting noted *Earthbound* fansite starmen.net. "I became really enamoured with that site, its personality and its denizens, and decided to try to create things to impress the people on it," he recalls. "Now my friends from that site run Fangamer, which sells my merchandise. So *Earthbound* and its fandom have never left me."

While *Earthbound* is *Undertale*'s most overt influence, in places Fox was keen to deviate from its ideas. Toriel, a kindly, goat-like monster, was a direct reaction to the absence or diminishment of mother characters in RPGs, including Itoi's game and the *Pokémon* series. She also served to mock the aggressive tutorials found in many contemporary games; Fox parodied their handholding approach in one sequence by having her physically guide you through a hazardous maze of spikes.

Toriel was just one of the many characters for which Fox sketched out ideas in his college notebook, with many deviating significantly from their final versions. Fox gave each of the central cast their own musical theme, too – and in the case of skeleton brothers Sans and Papyrus, composed the music beforehand. Fan-favourite Megalovania had been originally written for Fox's 2009 Halloween Hack of *Earthbound*, back when he was known by his online handle Radiation, and Bonetrousle was initially designed for another RPG Fox had been working on that was ultimately never released. The latter in particular fits the character of Papyrus so well it's hard to imagine it elsewhere. We ask Fox if the music informed the characterisation, or if he wrote the characters and then decided which themes should be used. "I'm not sure," he replies. "It probably helped set the mood of the scenes they're in, but as for Papyrus's personality, it existed before I decided I would use that song. Most of the other themes were written specifically for the characters."

Having established such a memorable cast, it seemed a shame to have the player kill them off. Fox conceived the idea of being able to spare the monsters you battle before writing the story, though in practice the Pacifist route takes more effort than the Neutral one, making it more difficult to stick to your principles. "In games, I noticed that the 'good path' was sometimes the easiest one," Fox says. "But if you do things without effort, then it doesn't feel meaningful." The Genocide route is harder still, though not simply because of one particularly difficult battle: killing characters that you've grown fond of is ▶

inherently more challenging than dodging hails of projectiles. For Fox, the biggest problem was one specific encounter. "I had trouble designing Mettaton's battle," he admits. "Coming up with gameplay ideas is difficult for me."

Still, he had plenty of them by the time he took to Kickstarter in June 2013 to fund further development of the game. Fox had already built a demo that backers could download from the campaign page, and his ambitions for *Undertale* had grown considerably, though he rebuts the suggestion that it was ever intended to be a short game. "I was just unsure if it was humanly possible to create it before making the demo," he says. "The reason it was bigger than expected is because my expectations of the areas, battles and so on increased a lot after making the demo." Fox asked for a slender $5,000, and ended up with ten times as much. His estimate of a summer 2014 release proved optimistic, with the finished game eventually launching in September 2015, though by crowdfunding standards that's neither uncommon nor excessive.

Besides, the response that greeted *Undertale* proved that Fox had used the extra time extremely well. Though it gained some very positive reviews, his game was more of a word-of-mouth success, picking up momentum as players excitedly discussed and debated its characters, its mysteries and the fearsome difficulty of its most challenging boss fights. Within three months, *Undertale* had become one of the year's biggest sellers on Steam, shifting half a million copies. Two months into the new year, that tally had doubled. Elsewhere, its growing online community helped propel it to another unlikely success: in a Best Game Ever poll celebrating the 20th anniversary of the walkthrough website GameFAQs, *Undertale* beat a range of classics, earning a comfortable victory over *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* in the final. Soon, its reach began to extend even further, after Fox approached 8-4 Ltd, the Shibuya-based localisation studio, to discuss bringing *Undertale* to a Japanese audience. 8-4 suggested porting it to PS4 and Vita, and by August of this year it had gained a new lease of life on console.

Fox, who had only created the game with himself and his friends in mind, was taken aback by its popularity – this was, after all, the most improbable of hits. "It takes influence from many strange sources, the graphics look bad in places, the gameplay is very simple," he says. "Most of all, the game's humour and surprise is derived from the fact that it defies the expected conventions of normal RPGs. That's the most interesting part to me, that even without understanding of the genre's conventions, the game still resonates with people – kids included. That's very cool."

Indeed, the game seemed to find particular favour with younger players. Fox attributes the awareness of *Undertale* among that group to the number of Let's Players who picked up on the game and released playthroughs on YouTube. If its virality ensured the attention of young eyes, there were other reasons why youngsters were so enamoured with the game. "It's funny, it's messed up, kind of scary, and isn't *for* kids, but doesn't exclude them," he says. "Kids love messed-up stuff that isn't for kids, but doesn't exclude them."

For Fox, meanwhile, success has been something of a double-edged sword. It's not wholly accurate to say he's retreated from public view, though he's a cautious interviewee, his newfound celebrity giving him good reason to be careful about what he says. But that's fitting for the creator of a game that bears all the hallmarks of outsider art, its willingness to boldly flout genre traditions making its breakout status seem even more unlikely. You could even say Fox's modus operandi hasn't changed much since then. *Undertale* feels not unlike a ROM hack; it's charged with the punkish energy and infectious passion you'd associate with a fan-made add-on, its rough edges contributing to its charm. In a reflective blog post on its first anniversary, Fox self-deprecatingly described it as "an 8/10, niche RPG game". Though when we ask if there's anything he would have done differently, he expresses only one regret. During development, he'd grown concerned that the Muffet miniboss fight was too difficult, and tweaked it a number of times – but he wishes he'd made it even easier.

Most of us would struggle to deal with the sudden rush of attention *Undertale* brought its creator, and it's evident that Fox hasn't been entirely comfortable in the glare of the spotlight. Two years on from its PC launch, has he been able to make his peace with the game's popularity? "The phrase 'make peace' sounds kind of harsh," he says. "I've always been glad many people have been able to enjoy playing the game, especially that it's given kids something to be excited about. However, my life has changed permanently and will never change back."

If there's a hint of ruefulness in those words, it's easy to understand why. Fox can never make another *Undertale*, or at least something with quite the same maverick spirit. He and his game are too well-known for any new material to be considered purely on its own terms, or to come from nowhere and surprise everyone in the same way his debut did. But just as *Earthbound* inspired him, perhaps *Undertale* might motivate another budding Toby Fox to create something similarly strange and wonderful. "I hope someday a kid who liked *Undertale* grows up and makes an amazing game," he says. "I would be happy to play that." Now, *that* would be interesting. ■

Q&A

John Ricciardi
Executive director, 8-4 Ltd



How did you bring *Undertale* to PS4 and Vita?
Initially, we weren't thinking about consoles, but we'd invested a tremendous amount of love and effort in the Japanese localisation; the PC market in Japan isn't that big comparatively, and we wanted to help the game reach a wider audience. That led to us pitching the idea of porting *Undertale* to PS4 and Vita for Japan. From there, it was like, 'We may as well do it in North America and Europe, too.' Next thing you know, we're publishing and developing a game in three territories simultaneously. It was a busy summer.

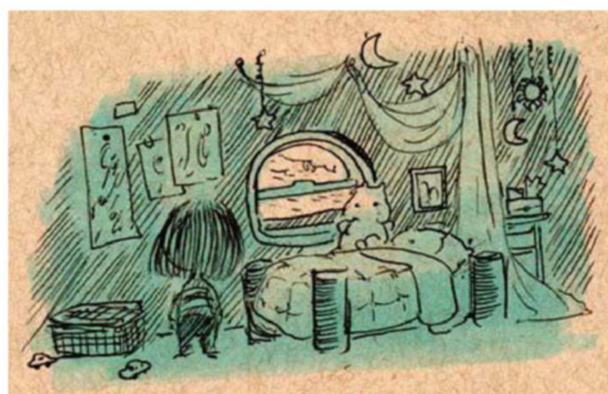
What were the biggest tests you faced?
We had to do a ton of custom work to get the game working properly and looking good in Japanese. Plus, we had to make a number of modifications to account for features in the PC version that didn't directly translate to console. We also wanted to make sure it ran every bit as smoothly on Vita as it does on PS4. It's been awesome seeing the community grow out here.

Did the localisation itself throw up any unusual challenges?
The Sans/Papyrus font thing doesn't quite translate to Japanese: there's an analogue to Sans, but not Papyrus. So we wound up making Papyrus's text tategaki – vertical, like old-school Japanese – and kept that a secret until the game was released. We were hoping to surprise and delight Japanese players in the same way the Sans and Papyrus fonts did for westerners the first time they played *Undertale* in English, and it seems to have worked, as the response was largely very positive. No one has ever gone to this level of detail in a Japanese indie translation before, which I'm sure helped!

















1 ***Undertale*'s opening introduces its universe with admirable economy, establishing a cavernous, monster-filled world known as the Underground, into which the player character falls.**
2 New Home is the capital of the Underground, and one of the last locations the player visits on their adventure.
3 ***Undertale*'s enveloping warmth and sense of mystery are captured in these sketches.**
4 Battle sprites for key characters. Fox hoped to avoid the samey encounters that had affected his enjoyment of other RPGs.
5 Though it's Fox's baby, he didn't work entirely alone, collaborating with Temmie Chang, who cameos as a feline monster

STUDIO PROFILE

MILESTONE

The reinvention of Italy's longrunning racing studio

By Chris Thursten





Founded 1996
Employees 200
Key staff Virgio Bixio, Luisa Bixio, Irvin Zonca, Ivan Del Duca
URL milestone.it
Selected softography *MotoGP 17*, *Ride 2*, *Valentino Rossi: The Game*, *MXGP3*, *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo*
Current projects *Gravel*, *Monster Energy Supercross*

Milestone's life began in 1994 as Graffiti, one of the first game development studios in Italy. After its first release, a SNES adaptation of the Atari puzzle game *Loopz*, the studio quickly established its precedence in the field of racing games. Starting with 1995's *Screamer* as Graffiti and then *Screamer 2*, *Screamer Rally* and *Superbike World Championship* as Milestone, the company grew into one of Italy's largest, and also most specialised, game developers.

"We were a small team. Very talented, I think," says vice president **Luisa Bixio**. "We were able to work with many publishers." In that first decade, Milestone worked with publishers including EA, Virgin, Capcom and Atari on licensed motorsport games. "At the beginning we had a very good time," Bixio says. "Lots of work to do."

Over time, however, the circumstances of racing-game development became more challenging. The transition from PC to console development was not straightforward for Milestone, and escalating technical demands placed strain on the studio's in-house engine. There was also much more competition within the racing genre. "The company was not working well any more," Bixio says. "For independent studios, it's not simple. Some work well because they work with Microsoft and so on – but for others it's very difficult."

It was at this time that major publishers started buying up dedicated racing studios to produce big-budget motorsport games in-house. This clashed with Milestone's renewed desire for independence, and made it harder for the studio to find the kind of work-for-hire contracts that had supported it through the lucrative first decade of its life. "If you want stability, it's not very simple if you depend on others to give you a job," Bixio says. "Looking at this situation, the company was not getting good results. We decided to change completely, and it has been a good decision."

Milestone brought in new management in 2011. Rather than seek out a permanent arrangement with a larger publisher, the company's new leadership decided to transition the studio into becoming a publisher itself. "A difficult process, but it was the only way to change," Bixio says. "The point is that we were very confident that we had good people in the company. Milestone had demonstrated in the past that we had the ability to make very good games. We changed some processes,


Vice president Luisa Bixio and head of game design Irvin Zonca lead a team of almost 200 staff at Milestone

but in the end it was to [increase] the capacity to make good games within the company."

The studio's new independence coincided with the acquisition of both the *MotoGP* and *World Rally Championship* licences (although Milestone had worked on *MotoGP* before, the licence at that time was held by Capcom). This led to a run of successful games, including the well-received *MotoGP 13*. "That changed the mood of the company," Bixio says.

motorsport licensors' data. "We have a lot of support from manufacturers such as Toyota, Ducati, Honda and so on," says head of game design **Irvin Zonca**. "We get a lot of information from the different motorsports, the different manufacturers, and we use it to teach people."

Milestone's position in Italy has been a help in both acquiring these licenses, getting access to real racing tracks, cars, data – and, crucially, helping with recruitment. Finding experienced game developers isn't always easy. iIstead, it's much simpler to find would-be developers with an enormous amount of passion for racing.

"This is something where the Italian games industry is closer to the British games industry,"

"WE GET A LOT OF INFORMATION FROM THE DIFFERENT MOTORSPORTS, AND WE USE IT TO TEACH PEOPLE"

Milestone has grown substantially in the last five years thanks to the success of these self-published licensed games. From 60 developers in 2012, it is now on the cusp of 200. Milestone is now the largest game-development studio in Italy and has become, in and of itself, a training ground for the country's nascent development scene. Many of the studio's leaders have spent the bulk of their careers at Milestone – technical director Ivan Del Duca was the first employee of the studio in the '90s and, after an absence of a few years during the period of Milestone's restructuring, has returned to lead the company's internal engine team.

As Milestone adapted to independence it switched from its own engine to a heavily modified version of Unreal, which made the company more flexible when developing across multiple platforms. Investments in drone photogrammetry, dynamic weather and more advanced audio technology also helped the studio remain competitive within the racing-sim genre. At the same time, the studio benefited from access to its

says Zonca. "Italy and the UK have a lot of passion, knowledge and history about racing cars," he continues. "We had a lot of battles on the tracks, and being Italian it means that you grow up in a country that celebrates Ferrari, Lamborghini. It's easier to find junior staff who already know how a vehicle works, or what the achievements of Valentino Rossi are. I really think this makes a difference."

This culture has made it easier to hire junior developers and train them to make the specific types of game that Milestone creates. "Italy has a passion for racing," Bixio says. "And the other point is that Milestone's processes make us very efficient. The bike genre is a niche, so to have success there you have to manage it with real attention. The bike market is not of interest to EA now, I think, because the numbers are not big enough. For Milestone they're big enough because we're quite efficient – that's key. Bikes were quite a free market, so we concentrated there. At the same time, we were increasing quality so we could invest our budget





The studio's modified version of Unreal Engine serves multiple types of racing game, from arcade to simulation – a far cry from the old days working on ailing in-house tech

differently. Bikes have been a good genre for us, but we want to grow more."

Milestone is currently undergoing another transition: from a successful developer of racing games for a specific audience to a massmarket middleweight publisher with its sights set on a broader audience. Upcoming arcade rally game *Gravel* is at the centre of this endeavour, a project that is the product of both Milestone's history and its expectations for the future.

"When we start to create our own ideas we proceed in different ways," Zonca says. "The first important part is asking ourselves – what would we like to play? What would we like to do? By doing this you're sure that you will put a lot of passion into the idea."

"Then, you have to start mapping the whole market of currently available racing games to understand where you can find a gap to fill," he continues. "I could want to create a new *Gran Turismo*, but I know that *Gran Turismo* is already available. Starting with our own idea, we have to modify it to ensure that our product can have its own space within the racing game world."

Milestone still faces fierce competition, and the same market forces that have supported its existence as an independent studio have also permitted similar opportunities for other developers working in the same field. Getting ahead of the curve means anticipating bigger shifts in audience expectation. Irvin Zonca believes that Milestone's 20-year history as a racing-game developer gives it an advantage in this regard.

"The market learns from history," he says. "You basically have two main ways of approaching racing games – simulations or arcade games. You can see that there are years where one of the two is most famous or recurrent. In the '90s it was just arcade, then PCs and consoles became more powerful and you had a lot of simulations. Then you had a lot of arcade [games] like *Need For Speed* or *Burnout*, and now we are, I think, exiting the second phase of racing simulation – you think about *Project CARS*, *Forza*, *Assetto Corsa*."

Despite Milestone's history with simulation, Zonca believes that the arcade model is due for a resurgence. "This is where I would like Milestone to focus," he says. "We love simulations, but I think sticking to simulation just because we like it would be a bad move because the market is very crowded. This is why we decided to design *Gravel* as a 'simcade' experience, because we noticed that a game like *Gravel* was missing from the market. If you think about the '90s you had a lot of arcade games like *Ridge Racer*, *Sega Rally*, our *Screamer* – and then games like those ones really disappeared from the market. We wanted to fill the gap."

"IF WE WANT TO KEEP GROWING AS A COMPANY WE HAVE TO FIND DIFFERENT WAYS OF DEVELOPING GAMES"

Motorbike-racing games helped secure Milestone's position in its years as an independent publisher, but growing from this point makes a move to four-wheel racing a necessity. "We don't want to abandon two wheels," Zonca says. "It's very important to us. It's been 20 years that we've been creating two wheel [racing] games. But if we want to keep growing as a company we have to find different ways of developing games… if we stay focused on where we already are, we can't grow. We can stabilise the company, and that's good, but it's not the best thing to do. We want to grow, so we need to diversify our offering."

Milestone's new, stronger position is allowing it to expand into new areas and invest more broadly in the future. *Gravel* is part of this, but the theme runs much deeper. A recently established team is at work on the studio's first, exploratory mobile game. "We'll start with one title," says Bixio. "It will be a licensed title. We have to understand this market. When we understand the rules of this market, we will invest more."

The studio is also looking to expand onto Nintendo Switch, a move that would not have been possible had it not shifted its development processes over to Unreal Engine several years ago. As that decision continues to pay dividends, Milestone is looking ahead to the next generation of technology that will allow it to compete with the bigger publishers. "Not only do we try to have the best technology day by day, but we are investing a lot in the future," Bixio says. "We are working on AI based on neural networks. It's a topic that is very important around the world, and can be very important for Milestone." Bixio believes that this improved AI technology will require around two years of development – that process is currently six months along, and involves collaboration with an external team.

"Videogames are technology," Bixio says. "If you don't look at the future, you cannot improve your game. It is the only way. If our R&D doesn't work on the next engine, the next technology, you don't arrive. You have to concentrate on what you're doing, but part of the team should always look at the future." ■



1 With *Gravel*, Milestone is making a play for the four-wheel arcade racing market: a throwback to the company's roots with *Screamer*. 2 Licensed games like *MXGP 3* have played a large role in Milestone's growth as an independent studio. 3 Working with licensors such as Monster Energy provides benefits beyond branding, including access to racing teams. 4 Milestone is looking to go beyond its motorcycle niche. 5 The company also distinguishes between track and off-road games. 6 Milestone devotes substantial resources to MotoGP's ongoing development

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim PSVR, Switch
Stick your *Rocket League*: if ever there were a compelling case for cross-platform features it's the release, on the same day, of two irresistible enhancements to *Skyrim*'s ageing, yet somehow endless, appeal. In VR, it's a delight; in the work bag, it's almost the game of our dreams. Yet time spent in one inevitably feels like time wasted in the other. Oh, for transferrable save files.

Doom Switch
Technically speaking, this is a marvel, an excellent conversion of an explosive game to Switch's tighter constraints that survives the transition almost without compromise. Yet it's not for us. This is a handheld game – if we want a big-screen *Doom*, we have other options – and those dinky Joy-Con sticks just don't give us the accuracy we need. And please, devs, if you're doing something similar in future, please enlarge the in-game text. Our old eyes can't cope.

Flipflop Solitaire iOS
Zach Gage's knack for taking established game concepts and playfully mucking around with them has borne delicious fruit before now: witness the wordsearch-riffing *Spelltower*, and the self-explanatory *Really Bad Chess*. Yet *Flipflop Solitaire* might be his masterpiece, taking a game known the world over, and with a few simple tweaks turning it into a game where 99 per cent of deals are solvable. Essential.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

You call this progress?

Back in the day, when this were all fields and so on, most games were like *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* (p108). They had a beginning, a middle and an end, and your progress through them would be its own reward; you'd see new sights, hear new stories, and do a host of different things along the way. Then the climax, and the credits – and then, most likely, you'd put the game back in the box, and move on.

Publishers are terrified of you doing that these days, and so these finite games are fast becoming the exception, rather than the rule. Unfortunately, as is often the way, we're getting thoroughly sick of the rule. If we have to play one more theoretically endless game with a loot-based progression system, we may actually lose our lunch.

Oddly for a game whose singleplayer component begins with people's legs being blown off, *Call Of Duty: WWII* (p112) sports a somewhat gentle, and largely ignorable, loot system that focuses on forgettable cosmetics, at least at launch. And we can't complain about it having a progression system, since the series has had one for over a decade now, and Sledgehammer Games knows better than to mess with that formula.



Elsewhere, though, it's a different story. *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* (p116), the series' mobile debut, is as cheekily monetised as anything on the App Store, even if its loot comes in the form of nice furniture you can craft. *Need For Speed Payback* (p114) fares little better, with a dice-roll upgrade system that looks like an actual slot machine – okay, it's set in a pseudo-Las Vegas, but that doesn't make it appropriate, just all the more brazen.

You probably already know the identity of the main culprit, of course (p104), which takes the concept to such a miserable extreme that it's prompted a rethink in how we review games that seem more interested in taking more of your money than they are in giving you value for what you've already paid. And they say the older generation is *wrong* to fear change.

Star Wars Battlefront II

Developer Criterion, DICE, EA Motive
Publisher EA
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Well, we suppose it was never going to last. We came away from E3 having tried to take *Star Wars Battlefront II*'s marketing pitch at face value, and failing to buy the premise. How could we possibly be expected to spend the duration of its story campaign empathising with a card-carrying member of the Empire – the daughter of an Admiral, no less! – mowing down the light side of the Force as we helped evil incarnate conquer the galaxy? The answer, predictably, is that you don't. The surprise is in just how quickly, after all that marketing spend, the *Battlefront II* writing team shows its hand. And even after the bait and switch is complete, we *still* don't buy it, albeit for different reasons.

The tipping point for protagonist Iden Versio comes barely an hour into *Battlefront II*'s six-hour campaign, when the nascent New Order decides to destroy what's left of the Empire after another loss to the Rebels in Return Of The Jedi. She's sent to her home planet to retrieve a senior member of the fleet, and does so with consummate professionalism. However, her orders did not permit her to rescue anyone else from certain death, and at this she bristles. To the point of treason, even. And so, within a heartbeat she is Iden Versio, Rebel Commander, palling around the galaxy with the great and good of the Rebellion. On the Death Star she'd have seen planets destroyed; millions of voices crying out in terror and all that. She'd have surely been aware that her boss was a hideous space racist – and that many of the people she fought alongside were too. But no, all that's fine. Wait. You're going to leave these poor people to die? *Our* people? That's just not cricket. I'm off.

Perhaps we are overthinking it. This is, in many ways, a game that gets worse the more you think about it, but we'll get to the multiplayer stuff later. With our objections to its premise put aside, there's a lot of enjoyment to be had out of *Battlefront II*'s campaign, almost all of which comes from its source material and EA's loving, slavish adherence to it. The story picks up shortly before the destruction of the second Death Star, and charts the rise of The New Order from the ashes of the Empire. It's a fine choice of time period, familiar but not overplayed, and one that gives EA Motive, the studio charged with producing the campaign in this three-studio project, licence to pepper the action with cameos from leading Star Wars lights – with you at the controls.

Some fare better than others. Leia Organa's appearance is a finely handled running battle through the streets of a Rebel-held city; Luke Skywalker's has him running around a cave slashing awkwardly at bugs the size of footballs. Quality varies, then, but they all help break up the pace, and are the driving force of a work of extreme fan service. At every turn, whatever you're doing, there will be something that reminds you of a moment in one of the (good) films, and that is no accident.

> With our objections to its premise put aside, there's a lot of enjoyment to be had out of Battlefront II's campaign



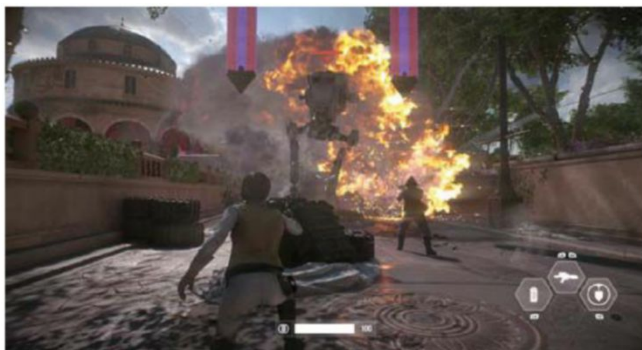
It's critical, too. This game's predecessor, released in 2015, was put together with similar reverence for the source material, but was widely criticised for the lack of meat on its bones. It was, some throwaway co-op missions aside, a purely online-multiplayer game. Keen to avoid a repeat of that – and perhaps with one eye on the expiration in a few years of its licensing deal with Star Wars owner Disney – EA has filled *Battlefront II* with *stuff*. And the campaign will, naturally, be most players' first port of call. So, as Versio hops around the galaxy to bring the New Order to its knees, you are subtly being taught how to play the multiplayer component which, its makers hope, will keep you busy for a couple-of-hundred hours after the campaign credits have rolled. You'll pilot X-Wings and TIE Fighters, AT-ATs and AT-STs; you'll have a good play with the heroes and villains who serve as killstreaks in the multiplayer component. Mission loadouts are fixed, ensuring you get a feel for different classes of weapon. It's smart stuff, showing just how much variety there is in the online mode's 40-person pitched battles. And it's essential since, if you take it all away, you see Motive doesn't have much else up its sleeve. This is Blockbuster Shooter Design 101: a series of assaults and defences, turrets and little stealth sections. It's rote and rudimentary, but elevated by the Star Wars IP and all that comes with it.

That's the good news. After the credits have rolled, lone players will likely head to what's rather misleadingly called Arcade mode, but they won't stay long. It's a suite of 16 missions – eight each for the light and dark sides of the Force – in which you control iconic characters in similarly famous locations. That sounds great, but the reality is anything but: you run around gormlessly, looking for randomly spawning, braindead AI enemies to dispatch before a timer expires, a three-second top-up awarded for each kill. There are three tiers of each mission, the harder ones reducing the time limit, buffing the bad guys and applying various modifiers, which turns something boring and easy into something boring and infuriating. And when you see the menu entry advising you that you've hit your daily limit for the mode's currency rewards, it feels like EA is holding its hands up. Yes, yes, we know. We're sorry. Look, go off and do something else, will you?

This brings us to the meat of the thing, the multiplayer, where EA's intent for you to spend a chunk of your precious free time for the next two years could hardly be made more clear. And it's difficult to see how it could possibly have got it more wrong. This is a game that has been cynically structured to drive player engagement across dozens, if not hundreds of hours, ▶



ABOVE Mission descriptions are to the point in multiplayer, but during the campaign Motive mucks about playfully with the formula. It's a nice detail in a game that's keen to please in all areas but the one that matters most







TOP Leia Organa stars in one of the better hero campaign missions, and it's no coincidence that she hews most closely to shooter convention. Lightsabers are, by their nature, broken, and Motive struggles to design challenge around them.
MAIN Walkers were the focal point of the 2015 *Battlefront*'s online battles. They're used sparingly here, but the maps on which they feature are among the best in the game.
LEFT Arcade mode's one-star challenges are insultingly easy; at the third tier, however, things quickly get ridiculous. Enemies are buffed, the timer is slashed and you only get a single life

Vehicle sections are high points both on- and offline, with Criterion striking a fine balance of handling that's accessible and friendly without having you feel like you're travelling on rails. Like much of the game, it deserves better

and to take that engagement and aggressively monetise the living heck out of it.

For the benefit of the half-dozen of you who really do live under a rock, here are the basics of *Battlefront II*'s progression problem. While there is a levelling system, it's really just there for show, its only significance being to wall off a crafting system until much later on. Everything else you'd expect from an online game's progression curve is instead driven by loot crates, bought either using a premium, paid-for currency (which was disabled on the eve of launch, but will surely be back) or an in-game equivalent that you acquire at a glacial pace. It will take even a handy player around ten matches of Galactic Assault, the game's star multiplayer attraction, to afford a 'Trooper' crate, which gives out a randomised selection of currency, crafting parts, emotes and skins – and, hopefully, new Star Card abilities for the bog-standard infantry you control for most of a match. Challenges can speed that up, but not by much, as can a daily login crate (typically containing 75 credits; Trooper crates cost over 4,000).

Then there are the heroes, some of which are unlocked from the start, but many of which must be bought with credits. While EA may have lowered the ludicrous initial cost by 75 per cent (Vader and Skywalker reduced from 60,000 credits to 15,000) after a quite tremendous online outcry, you're still looking at hours of play before you can unlock just one of the heroes and villains you probably bought the game for. Sadly, saving up means denying yourself any loot boxes for a while, and so making life more difficult for yourself while you try to work towards a faraway financial target without being able to tart up your favourite class with Star Card perks. The abilities they afford are straight upgrades, buffing with no trade-off, putting the haves and the have-nots in very different positions on the power curve. There is only one way out: pony up some real-world cash for a stack of loot crates, and hope for the best.

It's awful stuff, and a landmark. It's comfortably the worst implementation of a loot system we've seen in a full-price game – and we thought we'd seen some stinkers. It is the most miserly structure of the grubbiest of free-to-play games, plastered cynically over a full-priced product. It is a game of the most overt fan service that treats those very fans with utter disdain, binding them to a progression system that is entirely defined by randomisation and grinding with which they have no alternative but to engage if they want to progress and compete, unless they get their wallets out.

It is especially abhorrent that this should happen in a game with almost unrivalled massmarket appeal. It takes a seasoned player to know when they are being played, and the Star Wars fan who buys this game on name alone is in for one hell of a nasty shock – and potentially a very expensive one. After the barebones 2015 *Battlefront*, on paper this promised to be, finally, the big-budget Star Wars game of our dreams. Yet in reality it is not a new hope; it is a new low. No doubt EA and its trio of development studios will fix this mess eventually, but the fact they deemed it fit for purpose in the first place is unavoidable, and damning in the extreme. Whatever happens next, we're afraid we don't patch review scores.

4



FETT SOUNDS

While Galactic Assault is the main event of the multiplayer mode, beginners might be better off heading to the returning Heroes & Villains. Here, two teams of four of the franchise's most esteemed faces do battle in condensed maps in a pacier, more readable deathmatch than what's on offer elsewhere, and which gives you full control over characters whether you've formally unlocked them or not. While the pay-to-win structure of Star Cards makes its presence felt here too, there's at least something plausible about being cut to shreds by someone with a lightsaber – and this is the most efficient source of rank XP in the game, so will help you unlock the card-enhancing crafting features earlier than those who stick to Galactic Assault.

Post Script

Greed shot first: why Battlefront II's loot boxes represent a line in the sand for the industry

The bitter irony here is that the three studios involved in this project fulfilled their brief to the letter. DICE made a bigger, more rounded multiplayer mode. New EA studio Motive delivered a beautiful, if predictable, singleplayer campaign filled to bursting with lavish fan service. Criterion put its *Burnout* and *Need For Speed* experience to fine use in its design of *Battlefront II*'s vehicles. This was a project doomed not on the shop floor but in the boardroom, and in an emerging discipline of data-driven, psychologically manipulative design, a game built in an engine and killed in a spreadsheet. It was born in the free-to-play space, where monetisation is the only way to keep the lights on. This proves it ought to stay there.

We have, so far, opted to stay out of the loot-box debate. After all, development costs have skyrocketed over the years, while retail prices have remained the same, even ignoring inflation. After horse armour, alternative costumes, on-disc DLC, season and online passes and all the rest of it, loot crates, at first, felt like merely the latest attempt by the game industry to balance the books. And besides, loot is fun, a dopamine reward for a job well done that makes the next job on your list a little easier, and hopefully more enjoyable.

There is no fun here, and after a few-dozen hours butting our heads against the brick wall of *Battlefront II*'s 'progression' system, it has become abundantly clear that **Edge** needs to treat loot, and more widely, monetisation, as a core part of a game's design. While we have previously been able to separate the two – believing that a game and its finances should be treated as mutually exclusive – EA has proven otherwise.

Here the two feel inescapably intertwined. The standard digital edition of *Star Wars Battlefront II* costs a penny under £60. An extra £20 nets you the Elite Trooper Deluxe Edition, which offers two exclusive hero costumes, and then a series of shortcuts through the game's progression system. You'll be given instant access to two heroes that would otherwise need to be bought with hard-earned credits, some powerful Card Cards for them, and weapons that the hoi polloi will need to unlock by racking up 200 kills with each class of infantry. The message, from the get-go, is clear: either submit to the RNG gods through loot crates while grinding out kills in multiplayer, or pay up to bypass it all and give yourself an immediate advantage on the battlefield.

This is cynical in the extreme, sure – but worse, it is stupid, merely shortening the stick to which a pretty disappointing-looking carrot is attached. It's a recurring theme in a multiplayer game that immediately sets about facing the player with uncomfortable, even dumb, decisions that somehow, whichever way they lean, make you feel you're making the wrong choice. Early on, you quickly come to understand that you either spend credits on loot crates in the hope of getting something cool for your chosen infantry class, or save up for a hero. Pick the former and, if your luck's not in – if you pop open a crate and get a couple of emotes, a skin and a Star Card for a class you've never used, say – you'll wish you'd saved up. Pick the latter, and while you're grinding out credits, you'll wonder if each lost match or firefight might have gone differently if you'd focused on the loot system instead.

> Loot crates, at first, felt like merely the latest attempt by the game industry to balance the books



If you think that saving up for a hero or villain is going to be the answer to your problems, think again. EA hints at it in the way that there's no fanfare when you finally acquire a character; their menu icon simply turns from black-and-white to full colour. Once you head into a match, another unpleasant decision awaits. To ensure that those unlockable characters feel valuable, they are priced at up to 8,000 Battle Points, the performance-based currency you earn during play.

That's a lofty goal, and you can spend less on alternatives that may not carry a lightsaber but will, for a quarter of the price, give you an advantage over the enemy's rank and file. It's the same decision: do you spend now, or later? Cough up now for a 2,000 point supertrooper and you won't get a Skywalker this match, but you might get the win. Which, given the long-term investment you've made, is the more important to you? That you are even faced with that decision in a game of war is ridiculous. So is the game as a whole.

This is a publisher that will always, it seems, cop more flak for its dubious endeavours than any other company in the industry. The infamous fuss over *Mass Effect 3*'s ending saw EA voted the worst company in America in one online poll, beating out the likes of Halliburton and Philip Morris. The following year the always-online *SimCity* earned the publisher the title again, ahead of the likes of Bank Of America and Comcast. A community manager's attempt to defuse the tension over hero-unlock costs in the EA Access trial of *Battlefront II* resulted in the most-downvoted post in Reddit history. Clearly the internet consensus has it that EA deserves the rawest of deals.

Battlefront II proves it right for once. It is a game that offers up a progression system that rewards those who pay up, punishes severely those that don't and infects every part that matters of an otherwise-enjoyable multiplayer game. It will go down in history as the case-study example of what happens when monetisation goes too far. It proves that a dollar sign has no place on a design document. Above all, it ensures we won't be falling for it again. ■

Xenoblade Chronicles 2

Around 30 hours into *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*, we begin to wonder if the design document was simply a list of ideas with a tick next to every one. With a substantially shorter development cycle, it would be perfectly natural to assume Monolith Soft had forgone the series' sprawling scope for something more compact and focused. Heavens, no. It's positively bursting at the seams – but while it's hard not to admire the mad, bug-eyed ambition of Tetsuya Takahashi and his team, it's come at a cost. Once again, we have an adventure that's been built for a console that can't quite contain it, and a few too many compromises have been made to ensure it just about fits.

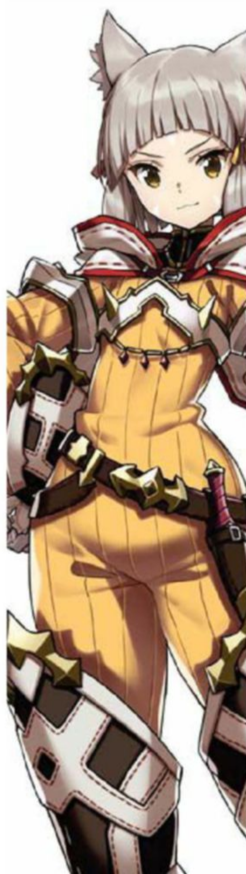
The number in the title is a clue that this is closer in style to the Wii original than its Wii U successor. Once again, we find ourselves in a world where communities live atop (or even inside) huge beasts known as Titans. These gargantuan beasts roam a cloud sea surrounding an Yggdrasil-like tree, with earnest young salvager Rex eking out a living by retrieving scraps from beneath the surface. Before long, he takes on one dangerous job too many, and via a plot contrivance we shan't reveal here, he ends up partnered with a Blade, Pyra, a living weapon who empowers him to fight.

Their bond seeds a combat system that seems to be pulling in two different directions, striving at once to be more accessible, yet more elaborate, than previous entries. Rex will attack automatically as long as he stays still, with a basic three-hit combo that deals more damage with each consecutive blow. It's bolstered by an initially limited palette of Arts, special techniques bound to three of the face buttons, with boosts for well-timed inputs that cancel auto-attacks into them. These feed into a meter governing special attacks, which grow in power the longer you wait – but can you afford to hold off that long?

That's one question you're forced to consider during these skirmishes, and there are plenty more: just as you're acclimatising to one system, a new one is introduced. After a while you're juggling two sets of face buttons, as you accrue more Blades and their individual Arts, and switch between them to counter an enemy's elemental strengths or attack patterns. There's risk involved with every command, whether you're inviting your two fellow party members to activate one of their Blades' specials, or daring to launch a devastating chain attack that means you won't be able to revive any fallen colleagues for a while. Pinning the latter to the little-used Plus button is an awkward stretch in a literal sense, all but proving it's trying to do too much at once. That's before you factor in the difference positioning makes to certain Arts, not to mention a combo system that encourages you to break, topple, launch and smash enemies – in that specific order – for more efficient damage-dealing.

Developer Monolith Soft
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now

The combat, sporadically delightful in the opening chapters, grows more frequently so as you progress



There's a lot to take in, then, but at times, and particularly when your team is working in unison, it's exhilarating stuff. In boss battles or encounters against lone, gigantic beasts, where each team member sticks to their designated role and the combos are flowing, it's thrillingly kinetic, bubbling with colour and noise. Just as easily, it can feel messy and cacophonous. You're beholden to the whims of your AI partners, who can suffer from inexplicable lapses, and there are too many moments where you find yourself filling in as the group's tank or healer as well as attacker-in-chief.

Meanwhile, any interruptions can easily take you back to the attritional early stages of an attack string. As such, should a wandering enemy or two decide to join in the fight, a comfortably winnable battle can become alarmingly difficult, and though you can encourage your allies to focus on individual targets, that doesn't prevent them from being broken, toppled, or, worse, shackled – where you're restricted from attacking and you can't switch Blades – by the rest. Just as you feel you've cracked it, a chastening encounter comes along to suggest otherwise. Your strategy may have been fine, but your luck was out – just as it sometimes is during exploration, when a Level 90 bird swoops down from nowhere and kills you with one shot, mere metres from a checkpoint. Granted, this was an issue in *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, but that doesn't make it any more palatable this time.

The improved draw distance might give you more of a chance to see such threats coming – unlike *X*, you won't get deadly creatures suddenly popping into existence ten yards in front of you. Yet we're not convinced the trade-off in performance is worth it. As a portable RPG, it's no doubt a big step up from *Xenoblade Chronicles 3D*, but at times it looks surprisingly rough, the resolution downgrade in large outdoor areas meaning that environments designed to inspire wonder are reduced to impressionistic smears. Perhaps it's a symptom of that shortened dev cycle, but either way it's less of a visual achievement than its Wii U predecessor. That extends to the character design. The cast may be more expressive than their stiff, waxy counterparts in *X*, but they could be ripped from any other generic anime-inspired JRPG.

Otherwise the bumps are relatively small. The combat, sporadically delightful in the opening chapters, grows more frequently so as you progress. The cast is easy to warm to: Rex's good-heartedness wins you over, as does the earthy Nia. It doesn't quite match the out-of-nowhere brilliance of the first game, nor is it as bold as the daring, but flawed, follow-up. Still, those seeking a game large and enveloping enough to carry them through the holiday season and beyond will find that particular box well and truly ticked.

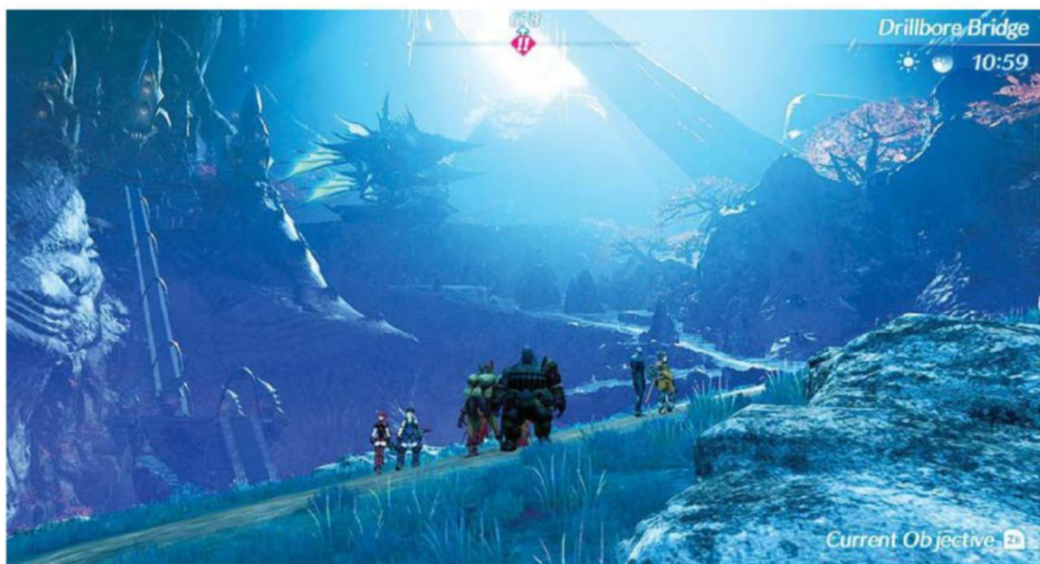
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ABOVE The timing window for pressing buttons to augment specials and chain attacks is generous enough that you'll rarely fail them





MAIN The UI might look a little obtrusive, but since you need to pay at least as much attention to the various gauges and cooldowns as the action in the middle, it needs to be this prominent.
ABOVE Yasunori Mitsuda, whose score was one of the few good things about the risible ***Valkyria Revolution***, contributes several themes to an outstanding soundtrack – though there's arguably nothing to quite match the original's Gaur Plain.
LEFT A range of item types can be placed into each Driver's pouch for a time-limited stat boost. There are further bonuses for picking a favourite of any attached Blades

▶



If you're taking a lot of damage, it pays to switch to a Blade with a move that produces HP potions when it hits

Post Script

Why the Blades are at the heart of everything Xenoblade Chronicles 2 gets right – and wrong

There's an uncomfortable moment when you realise something so fundamental to a game may also be what's holding it back. Blades, the weaponised life forms of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*, are undoubtedly one of the game's greatest assets, yet it soon becomes clear that their presence is at least partly responsible for its most glaring faults.

One of the biggest problems manifests in the early stages, particularly if your Switch is undocked. The resolution hit in handheld mode is acceptable for the most part, but in some areas the environments devolve into a soupy mess, and the situation is exacerbated by combat. Monolith's game communicates plenty via its UI, which remains crisp throughout, but with positioning so crucial to the damage you inflict with certain Arts, the fact that you can't always properly gauge an enemy's orientation becomes an irritant, particularly when things are getting hairy.

You mightn't necessarily think that's a direct result of the Blades, but their physical presence on the battlefield is undoubtedly a factor: it's hard not to imagine that with three characters, the performance would surely be better than with six. And it's not simply a matter of how the game runs: they add to the visual noise, making the action busier than it needs to be.

They also seem to make it harder to pick off enemies one by one, or engage smaller groups by taunting them from a safe distance. Since they hang a little way back from the action, tethered to their Driver, they'll naturally widen the detection radius as you fight. With no way to tighten your party's formation, you're left hoping you can corral opponents into positions well away from patrolling monsters or troops – not least since you have no control over your other party members.

Once you're familiar with these idiosyncrasies, you're better able to counteract them, or at least limit the frequency with which such problems arise. And there's a Pokémon-like compulsion to collect more Blades, which are made all the more desirable by the random way they're accrued. Characters must resonate with special crystals to produce a Blade, prompting a sequence where they're teasingly revealed: a process not unlike opening a loot box, albeit without having paid for the privilege. Most Blades are generic in nature, coming in a uniform colour scheme, with their form determined by the weapon they wield. There are, however, uncommon variants that are distinct in their designs, with more expansive skill trees to match their greater potential. Once you've got one, you'll want more – especially as they give you a broader palette of techniques and elemental counters to choose from in battle.

That's not always a good thing when it comes to your AI teammates, however. Giving Nia an armoured brute as an extra attacking option will recast her as a jack-of-all-trades, but as a result she may well neglect her duties as the group's healer. Which is fine if you want to take on the mantle – not a terrible idea, in fact – but in doing so you're limiting your own damage output.

Besides, the more the merrier doesn't really apply when you need to keep everyone on an even footing. Though *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*-style mercenary quests let you send out unused Blades to gain experience, these missions are best reserved for any permanently-benched generic variants to earn rewards while you're otherwise occupied.

Still, catching them all is hardly mandatory, and once you've accumulated a handful of rare Blades, finding the right mix of moves to produce efficient combos becomes an absorbing tactical metagame in its own right, supplementing the moment-to-moment strategies of the combat. And for those bitten by the collection bug? Well, buckle up – you've got a long journey ahead of you. ■

Call Of Duty: WWII

War, it turns out, is actually heaven. *Call Of Duty: WWII*'s principal addition to its series' timeworn multiplayer formula may not actually be all that new in a wider context, but it's the most enjoyable time we've had with a *COD* online mode in many a year. War mode puts you on either the attacking or defending side, focusing on a series of shifting objectives. The action is bound to a timer; should it run out before the attacking side completes the current objective, it's round over and a victory for the defending team. It's nothing we haven't seen before elsewhere, but in the context of this series' multiplayer it's immensely refreshing, giving context and focus to *COD*'s annual merry-go-round of death.

Each objective requires a change in approach for both sides – only a fool brings their sniper rifle to the battle over the ammo dump, but it feels essential during the bridge section – encouraging, if not quite forcing, players to experiment with loadouts. And by ignoring your kill:death ratio, which is neither displayed during the game nor is tracked behind the scenes, War lets lesser-skilled players take part without worrying about the end-of-game wall of shame, and allows everyone to focus on the objective without a care about what it's doing to their stats.

Above all it proves that the luxury of working within the confines of so well-established a template is that you can pluck ideas from elsewhere, and have them feel fresh. So it is with Headquarters, a social hub that owes an obvious debt to *Destiny* and underpins, at least in theory, the entirety of the game's multiplayer experience. Yet while War is an effective magpie job on *Battlefield*'s Conquest gametype, Headquarters proves that you can't just rip off an idea – you have to do it well.

First up is that, a fortnight and counting after launch, we are yet to see another soul in Headquarters, matchmaking issues leaving us running disappointedly around our own personal Normandy army base. That rather takes the shine off the revised loot-crate system: they now drop directly into the stage, and other players can see their contents when you open them. In another *Destiny* nod, *WWII* has bounties – some permanent, others timed – that only really come in two flavours. It's either a grind (500 kills in a week, say) or the sort of speed-slayer challenge that feels beyond all but the most capable of players (100 kills in 40 minutes, you say? No ta). The latter type must be bought using an in-game currency, and the more achievable an objective, the higher its cost. It feels like it should be the other way round, letting lesser skilled, or more casual, players pick up cheap bounties for a basic reward, while the fifth-prestige hardcore, who will naturally be sitting on more currency, pony up a premium for tougher challenges that yield better prizes. Bounties should encourage you to keep playing; these do the opposite.

Developer Sledgehammer Games
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Even away from War mode, this is the most fun we've had in a COD multiplayer in years



DEAD AIM
WWII strips away all the silly stuff that has been bolted on to the *COD* template, and that's equally true for the now-annual Zombies component. In recent years this cooperative mode has been styled as an '80s b-horror and a noir thriller; here it's a straightforward tale of zombies in swastika hats that improves greatly on its predecessors. This is partly a question of tone, but its greatest asset is its structure. While you can still choose your own route around the world, spending currency accrued from kills to unlock new paths, the action is now bound to a series of clearly communicated objectives that set out exactly where you should be heading to progress the narrative. Once again, it's about going back to basics – once again, it pays off.

That's a shame, because even away from War mode this is the most fun we've had in a *COD* multiplayer component in years. While it's still a little pacier than we'd like, the return to the simpler militaristic times of 1940s Europe is a great help. You might still feel too slow for it, but the removal of the double-jumps and wall-running that have defined recent *COD*s means that the action is at least more grounded, and therefore more readable, set on maps whose layouts make sense. You'll still kill one guy then get shot in the back of the head by another, but at least your killer won't have double-jumped over the wall you had your back to.

The campaign, however, is a little less successful. It's already been criticised for the way it airbrushes the Allies out of history, but that's a natural consequence of having such a tight focus. This is really a story of two men: protagonist Red Daniels, the archetypical Good Southern Boy, and Robert Zussman, a Chicago-born wise-cracker of German-Jewish descent whose rather on-the-nose characterisation somehow isn't enough to stop you liking him. It's predictable stuff but it'll be a cold heart indeed that isn't at least a little touched by what is an uncommonly personal climax to a *COD* campaign. And it looks sumptuous, Sledgehammer's work on a new shader system reaping obvious dividends, especially on 4K consoles.

While it may sit near the bleeding edge in tech terms, however, *COD: WWII*'s design ethos reminds you why the setting was abandoned by game developers a decade ago. Levels escalate in predictable patterns; you assault a point, then defend it, and then the heavy armour shows up. There were only so many ways to blow up a tank in the '40s, and Sledgehammer, to its credit, tries them all, but the formula wears thin and the setting offers little by way of variety elsewhere. Stealth, at least, is finely implemented – get spotted and the game checkpoints instantly, forcing you to go loud for the rest of the level. The weaponry's great, too, the standout a delightful retooling of sniper rifles: a click of the left stick, traditionally used to hold your breath and steady your aim, now grants a gentle bullet-time effect.

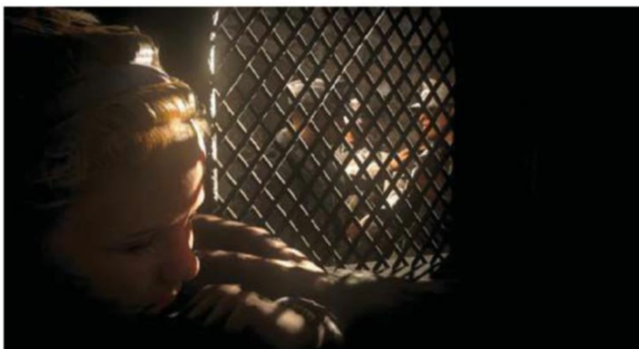
Yet it's the multiplayer that's the main draw this time, and after years of being scythed down by wall-running SMG players with catlike reactions, there's something comforting about a *COD* game in which brains once again feel as important as reflexes. With the fluff and gimmickry of recent instalments gone, this comes close to reminding you why *Call Of Duty* remains the most popular FPS on the planet. At its best it's a game of wits and skill, and thanks to War is now a game of tactics for even the most casual player. How apt that, after half a decade spent in futuristic flights of fancy, *Call Of Duty* should take an overdue step forward by travelling 70 years into the past.

7

RIGHT This is a fine-looking game in open play, rising to positively outrageous in cutscenes. Developer Sledgehammer Games has spent the years since *Advanced Warfare* working on its tech, and it shows. **MAIN** You'd better get used to the sight of tanks exploding; at least Sledgehammer's explosion tech ensures the payoff's worthwhile, even though the buildup isn't. **BOTTOM** There's only one forced stealth section in the game, and it's a stinker – but we'll forgive it for giving us this beautifully lit scene









ABOVE City streets are a rare sight during the campaign. This bid to regain Paris is decent, but the mission before – a stealthy infiltration with you in control of a French Resistance leader – is one of few real standouts

Need For Speed Payback

There's a moment quite early in this 23rd *Need For Speed* title in which the writing and racing meld together, and the promise of a narrative-focused driving game bears fruit. Struggling for employment after his crew disbands, Mac the drift racer earns a crust by taking people on 'driving experiences' in which he throws a car around some corners while they scream. One such client is a YouTube 'influencer' who speaks more to his viewers than he does to Mac, demands selfies every six seconds, and appears to be cosplaying as Kid Rock. So when our passenger begins to feel quite nauseous during the drift challenge, we suddenly feel a tremendous impetus to drive quickly and aggressively. Making this oik miserable is so much more compelling than hitting the required drift score.

Unfortunately, this moment serves primarily to show the rest of the game up. All the times that our 'hero' Tyler tells people, "I'm the best racer in town" over the radio while driving meaningless checkpoint runs. All the times that Jess, the criminal underground connection, evades the cops or delivers suspicious packages to people via meaningless checkpoint runs. Given that The Fast And The Furious long ago cornered the market for creative endeavours about illegal street racing, *Payback* was always going to be an uphill struggle for Ghost Games' writers. But as rare glimmers like that queasy drift challenge demonstrate, it's not impossible to find personality and humour in these repetitive activities.

Structurally, this is archetypal *Need For Speed*. Fortune Valley is an open world of minimap markers, each one representing a new race in one of several disciplines. The twisty rural highways and uptown grids work well as venues for the enormous volume of races, drag sprints, drift challenges and – yep – meaningless checkpoint runs, but what they don't have is any sense of place. Fictional chunks of Americana are the series' calling card, but it feels as though this iteration's quasi-Vegas setting is a missed opportunity. It's always hard to make a city feel like a city when the streets are entirely devoid of human beings, but the paucity of gaudy casino exteriors and fake pyramids here is criminal.

Yet, characterless as they are, these roads can still entertain. Car behaviour is *Payback*'s strong suit, so much so that it almost puts together a solid counter-argument to the many failings that surround it. Not long ago most racing games drove like this, offering wildly forgiving handling that demanded little attention to the brake pedal and more often than not rewarded a tap of it with glorious powerslides. Now this resolutely arcade handling is a rarity, and all the more pleasurable for it. There's certainly an acclimatisation process as the cars reveal that they can take 90-degree turns without getting the brake pads dirty, but after making the mental adjustments to dislodge the *Forza* mindset, there's a lot to like about *Payback*'s outrageously accommodating vehicles.

However, this isn't a game about simply being left alone with a car to enjoy its handling. This is faux-Hollywood spectacle, a story of three street racers trying to take down a crime syndicate by driving to and fro. As such, many races involve cinematic set-pieces and barrages of expository dialogue from opponents. And there'd be a great game in that, if it were given a completely different treatment to *Payback*. The set-pieces invariably wrench control away from the player during the most spectacular sequences. This doesn't seem to be a decision imposed by technical limitations; it's perfectly possible, after all, to render a player-controlled car driving up a ramp or shunting a lorry in realtime these days. Perhaps it felt like the most cinematic approach to lean on cutscenes, but the effect is that of being held at arm's length to the action, and simply ferrying the car from scene to scene. Central trio Tyler, Mac, and Jess can do little to combat that effect, either: when they're not reminding each other of recent plot events, they're reasserting their motivations in movie-poster-tagline terms.

Admittedly, a *Need For Speed* game doesn't exactly need to play out like a Fellini film. But it's a problem in *Payback* because Ghost Games obviously wants its players to spend a long time in Fortune City. Unlocks and currency are doled out miserably slowly, and each event carries a recommended car-spec level, which is achieved by winning races and earning upgrade-part drops. This aspect of progression alone quickly becomes a grind. Buying, upgrading, and customising cars was once central to the *Need For Speed* experience: here it feels like hard work between hammy cutscenes. Playing as the game intends, over many hours, the deficiencies in the story only become more grating. It simply doesn't have anything like the kind of quality to justify the enormous time commitment it demands.

And then there are the performance issues. Driving though an oncoming vehicle is a distinct possibility in Fortune City, and on Xbox One also suffers several freezes in which the game world keeps on moving while our car is frozen in stasis, high-speed effects such as smeared headlight trails hanging in the air. In those moments, locked in place mid-event, you are left to tot up all the modern faux pas that *Payback* includes in one place. An open world that offers nothing but uneventful journeys between missions; draconian progression doled out loot box by loot box; tin-eared scripting and a wilful disregard for player freedom. Were it not for the driving model, which against all odds remains a pleasure, and desperately rare moments of imaginative mission design, this would be an abject failure. As it stands, it's simply a serious one.

4

Developer Ghost Games
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

It simply doesn't have anything like the kind of quality to justify the enormous time commitment it demands



THE LATEST ODDS
Need For Speed Payback doubles down on its Vegas theme with Side Bets. Before each event, it tempts you to back yourself on completing a mid-race challenge to earn more money, perhaps leading for 60 seconds or completing a 75-foot jump along the way. It's one of the game's rare good ideas, finding thematic consistency and adding some interest to otherwise repetitive drives. Sadly the variety of Side Bets is limited, and few of them require that you dramatically change your approach to an event. The most enjoyable requires that you languish at the back for most of the race before putting together a late surge, but more often than not you're only given the option to complete a lengthy drift or lead from the front.

RIGHT Distorting the scenery at close proximity and throwing a barrage of motion blur into the periphery, the sense of speed conveyed by the exterior camera is something that can't be faulted. BELOW This isn't a world full of carefully designed vistas and personality. It's a utilitarian tangle of highways and downtown grids with infrequent Vegas decadence. MAIN In among the perennial car list inclusions such as this M5 are a generous batch of eccentric choices. Drifting in the ultra-functional Volvo 242 DL, for example, is a perverse thrill







ABOVE Tyler Morgan talks too much to be a blank slate character upon which the player can superimpose their own personality, but unfortunately fails to say anything sufficiently interesting to exert one of his own



Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Android, iOS (tested)
Release Out now

We shake the first tree and sigh. A tap of the trunk, and it relinquishes its fruit as expected, but this time its yield is replaced with a timer: 2hr 59min. It's merely the first of many numbers you'll see playing *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp*. The series' peculiar spell has always been dependent on maintaining an illusion, a combination of smart engineering and excellent writing disguising the ones and zeroes that are invisibly determining the behaviour of your villagers and the rules of its world. Clarke's third law is only true so long as the magician withholds his secrets; *Pocket Camp* doesn't so much let you peek behind the curtain as forcefully tear the drapes down and show you exactly how everything works. There are moments at which you can admire the assembly, but the whole thing feels grimly mechanical.

It begins, fittingly, with a misunderstanding, as you arrive at a campsite and are immediately appointed its new manager. Your job is to make it a more attractive place to visit. Given a selection of themes (natural, cute, sporty and cool), you're told which animal is a fan of each, and thus you determine your first guest. You will, the game insists, be able to collect all items regardless of your pick, and it's here that *Pocket Camp*'s main theme is exposed. This is a game about acquisition.

Those for whom *Animal Crossing* has always been about the steady accumulation of furniture may yet get sucked into the central loop. Your first animal visitor arrives with a request, which you quickly fulfil, and a heart appears over their head, filling up until you're informed that your friendship has levelled up. Your reward is two types of currency. We're accustomed to being given a small monetary bonus for completing tasks in *Animal Crossing*, but this time our payment also includes crafting materials. These, predictably, are used to build furniture and amenities that will bring more animals into your orbit, in turn unlocking new requests and catalogue options. To build those, you'll need more crafting materials, which means completing more requests, and the roundabout continues to spin.

Animals are easy to please, usually requiring items that can be obtained without any trouble. You'll flit between a handful of compact locations in your camper van, tapping them on the map screen to be whizzed there within seconds. Fishing up a horse mackerel at Saltwater Shores is a matter of approaching a shadow in the water, tapping to throw out your line and then again when prompted to reel it in. Capturing a monarch butterfly or fruit beetle on Sunburst Island is equally simple: tap once to begin a stealthy approach, and then once more when you're told to swing your net. *Animal Crossing* has never been about challenge, but these activities have traditionally required a modicum of skill and, in some cases, patience. Success here, however, is a foregone conclusion.

There are moments at which you can admire its assembly, but the whole thing feels grimly mechanical



VAN DESIGNS
Since you're encouraged to tailor your campsite's layout to the desires of potential visitors, your camper van is the only place you can really call home. At first, it seems a little too compact to really make it your own, but that all changes once you meet Giovanni, head of a trio of avian mechanics. To all intents and purposes, he's *Pocket Camp*'s Tom Nook: you'll end up in hock to him if you choose to expand the interior space, or even extend it to a second floor, though he's happy for you to pay the loan back in your own time. Meanwhile, you can pay Bells to change the paint, or spend Leaf Tickets on bespoke exterior designs if two tones isn't stylish enough.

Yet if you want these so-called friends to visit your campsite, they become more demanding, insisting you've accrued several specific pieces of furniture. The first item we need in order to win the approval of a fussy penguin takes one minute for alpaca handyman Cyrus to craft; the next arrives within three. The wait for the third balloons to seven hours. Inevitably, there's a way to speed things up: Leaf Tickets are earned via in-game accomplishments, or instantly by spending real-world money. Waiting has always been a part of *Animal Crossing*, of course. But those timers were hidden from view, while changing the in-game clock was an alternative option for the impatient. No longer.

You're encouraged to spend those hard-earned tickets elsewhere, too. You'll need a handful to increase your inventory space, and more for Cyrus to craft two items at once. Unless you've got several friends to hand, they're needed for a rock-smashing minigame at the quarry that rewards you with more bells and crafting materials. Then again, how are you going to afford the exclusive catalogue items that cost 250 Leaf Tickets each? They're only here for another 40 days, after all. By the time you've linked your Nintendo account and achieved a clutch of early stretch goals, you may be able to afford one of them. Accruing as many for the next will take more grinding, but you'll need a request ticket every time you want animals to give you more tasks.

At this point it becomes clearer than ever that you're not hanging out with friends, but feeding tokens into vending machines. Brief vignettes where an animal shows you her shell collection, or cooks up a soup, aren't enough: it's hard to feel much of an attachment to them when your interactions are limited to a series of transactions. In previous games, incidental dialogue and random events helped give these animals at least a semblance of life, of an existence independent of your presence. Here, their role is reduced to that of a minor NPC in an RPG, offering dull quests for prosaic rewards.

Moments of surprise or delight are sorely few. For each location you're told exactly what you'll find. For each piece of furniture you craft, you're informed which animal will like it. For each of the time-sensitive and persistent goals, you know your reward before you've completed it. These are, perhaps, necessary evils: though the economy isn't as brutally geared towards microtransactions as other free-to-play games, the presence of paid elements seems to have forced Nintendo's hand. As a result, this is only an *Animal Crossing* game in the most superficial sense. It looks and sounds the part, and there are fleeting moments where it captures the spirit of kindness that suffused the console and handheld games. But as friendship becomes just another commodity, the whole exercise feels more and more cynical. Somewhere, *Animal Crossing* has mislaid its soul.

5





ABOVE The interface is reasonably intuitive, though we could do without the banner reminders of the rare gear we can't afford





ABOVE Oddly, you only have to own an object an animal likes before they'll pay your campsite a visit, rather than being forced to incorporate it into your layout. Still, anything for Tex and his fruit tarts.
RIGHT Build a new amenity, and animals will gather to celebrate it. You'll also increase the maximum friendship level for any animal whose tastes it matches.
FAR RIGHT Fishing is a doddle, but you can save time by lobbing a throw net from the pier for a larger haul, just as smearing honey on tree stumps lets you net several bugs at once. Naturally, you can guarantee a more profitable catch by spending Leaf Tickets

Hidden Agenda

Nothing gets a party started like a rollicking tale of braindead coppers, grisly murders and child abuse, does it? We'd suggest turning down an invite to any soiree with a game of *Hidden Agenda* planned, as showing up means resigning yourself to two hours of teeth-gritting awkwardness.

It's a shame, because by all accounts, a party game made by the developers of campy schlock-horror *Until Dawn* should be a success. It was a singleplayer game, sure, but branching storylines and jumpscares made it an entertaining couchplay experience. Supermassive has doubled down on this by building thriller *Hidden Agenda* around Playlink, Sony's multiplayer scheme which repurposes smartphones as controllers. Trite conversations progress at a languid pace, with players voting on dialogue choices by moving their cursor into the corresponding box on their phone's screen. When detective Becky Marnie's partner tries to console her after she's put on file work instead of being allowed to go hunting the Trapper Killer, everyone must decide: should her response be 'assertive' or 'depressed'?

It's about as gripping as it sounds. The whodunit is cliché, starring expressionless character models – and you can spot the twist a mile off. Story mode falls flat, but things pick up in Competitive: at the start of a round, someone receives an Agenda, visible only on their phone, to fulfil and score extra points. When rounds end, everybody votes to out the manipulator.

Sadly, many Agendas feel inconsequential. One tasks us to have lawyer Felicity Graves act hostile towards a suspect. The vague objective doesn't require much in the way of scheming: we're not even sure how we achieve it. Come voting time, our pals are confused as to what Agenda could have been realised, and by whom, so we get off scot-free. Pivotal choices that require unanimous agreement are where the real fun lies, triggering debate. Here, takeover cards come into play; awarded to whoever completes basic quicktime events the fastest, using one lets you override group decisions. Two problems arise. One, anyone with half a brain hoards these for the big choices, leading to a tedious takeover chain; two, non-gaming party guests are at a disadvantage, which rather defeats the point.

Narratively and mechanically clumsy it may be, but at least *Hidden Agenda* isn't socially awkward: it's a laugh, albeit at the expense of itself. Supermassive has created an icebreaker, and that's no mean feat. Then again, charades doesn't require 150MB of precious digital real estate, banal chit-chat is banned, and if any lecherous priests turn up to spoil the mood, then you've only yourself to blame.

4

The writing's baffling, with poorly fleshed-out branching paths leaving big plot holes in a single playthrough. It's tonal inconsistencies that jar most: things swing from Saw-like slayings to "Oh, cookies!" in minutes

Developer Supermassive Games
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Release Out now



TOUCH AND GO
Hidden Agenda paints Playlink in both positive and negative lights. Being able to use phones as controllers makes getting involved easy, and it doubling as a private information screen in a game of deception like this is clever. It's jarring, however, that everyone needs to download the app to play (Jackbox Games had this sorted years ago). The app's next to useless when playing solo, and if you minimise it to check a text message, you'll be kicked from the game unceremoniously.



Bury Me, My Love

We haven't had a text from our wife in three hours. Normally, we wouldn't be too worried, but last we heard, she was about to cross the Evros river in an inflatable canoe. In *Bury Me, My Love*, we are Majd, whose wife, Nour, has left their war-torn homeland for the safety of Europe. It's the story of a Syrian refugee, told not through newspaper articles, but through an interactive instant-messaging conversation: selfies, abbreviations, emojis and all.

The use of the format is *Bury Me, My Love*'s masterstroke. It makes the faceless story of thousands suddenly intimate. This fictional relationship is implanted into your real digital life: the app sends push notifications to your phone, texts from Nour sitting next to messages from other contacts. There's a natural rhythm to your ongoing conversation, as exchanges of various lengths play out in pseudo-realtime. A six-hour gap in the story while Nour sleeps in a grubby hotel, or underneath a disused train, might only mean a couple of hours' worth of anxious glances at your phone.

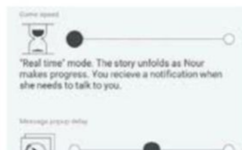
You'll be glad of that condensed timeframe – the waiting is the hardest part. Thanks to the convincing presentation (the WhatsApp-like interface even lets the couple swap 'pictures', realised as sketches) and relatable writing, it becomes oddly difficult to mentally separate this exchange from real long-distance communications. Interactions range from funny, to heartbreaking, to strained, as you tap to send texts or choose replies.

Most often, the couple's chats are wonderfully mundane. Majd, you come to learn, is a bit of a history nerd; Nour is excitable and headstrong, with a wicked sense of humour. Some awkward phrasing can niggle, as does the realisation that our tapping at the Reply box isn't required to send texts: apart from branching dialogue choices, conversations play automatically. It robs the game a little of its already limited interactivity – and, by association, its sense of immersion.

Despite elements of choice and multiple endings, *Bury Me, My Love* appears content-light as soon as the second playthrough, since conversations repeat. If you return, it'll likely be for the quality of the vignettes, and the lure of seeing more. One where Nour is followed by a group of neo-Nazis is frantic, while another sequence involving a stuffed rabbit is masterfully paced – and if, like us, you encourage your wife to cross the Atlantic in a rubber dinghy, the stress of waiting for a reply could well derail your work day. After that, it's not a stretch to imagine how it might disrupt a life, a family, an entire country. That's *Bury Me, My Love*'s achievement: that a series of simulated text messages can rival a lifetime's worth of headlines.

7

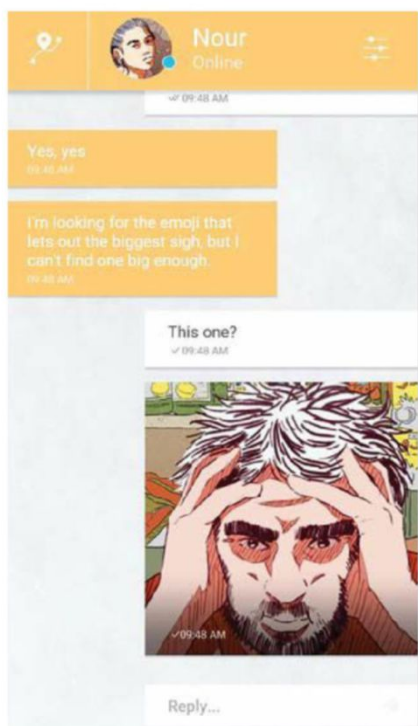
Developer The Pixel Hunt, Figs
Publisher Ico Media
Format Android, iOS (tested)
Release Out now

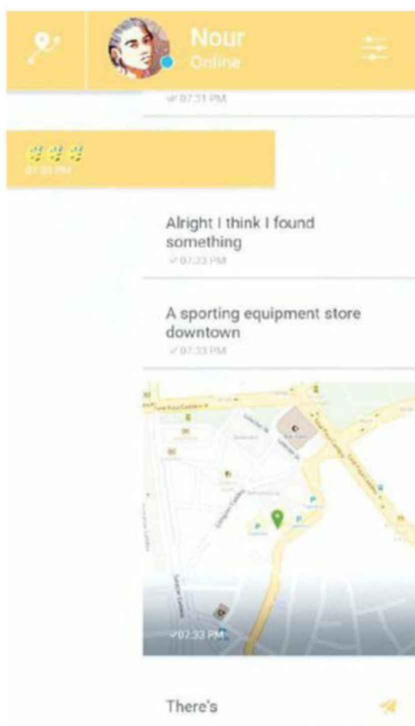


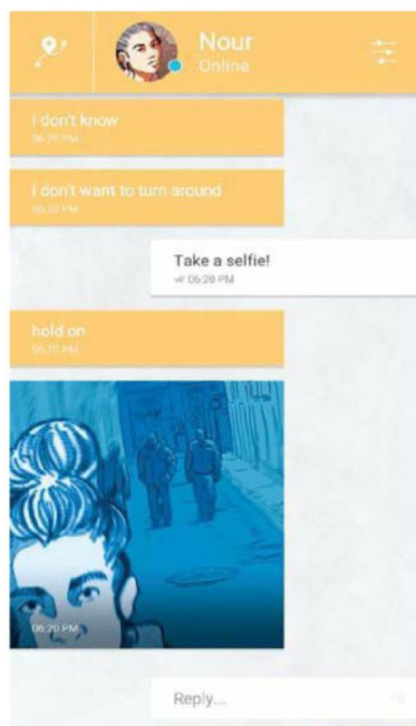
THE HARDEST PART

Should you decide to have another go at helping Nour, or if your time is limited, the app has a convenient array of settings to help you out. Realtime mode (and push notifications) can be toggled off, meaning the conversation continues without pause. You can also speed up the rate at which Nour types out replies. Normally, we'd recommend not trying to rush through a game, but it does take several days to complete one emotionally demanding cycle in pseudo-realtime.

The game does an admirable job of breaking up walls of text with other media: screenshots of maps, selfies and emoji-based jokes. The biggest – and most intriguing – format change is saved for the conclusion, however







Million Onion Hotel

Dispel any thoughts of Yoshiro Kimura tempering his more eccentric tendencies. If anything, *Million Onion Hotel* is even weirder than *Dandy Dungeon*, from the kazoo melodies and jazz-piano backing of its title screen theme to a climactic battle against a colossal, bubble-blowing fish. Again, however, it's deceptively clever, a veneer of gaudy strangeness belying a puzzle game of quiet ingenuity that soon becomes captivating.

Inside the eponymous establishment lies a 5x5 grid, from which onions steadily sprout, leaving behind a red square when tapped. Form a red line in any direction and a clock will drop, refilling the ticking timer at the top of the screen and advancing you one level. But, as you'll soon discover, single lines aren't enough. No matter how much they glow and wiggle, you need to resist the natural temptation to play whack-an-onion and instead set up the board so you can make two or three lines with a single tap, while ensuring you don't wait too long for a kind drop.

Those doubles and triples will whisk you off to space, where fruits of increasing value pop up. Patience and good fortune may well earn you a quadruple – or a miracle, in the game's parlance – which grants you yet more time to build your score. Oh, and to amass a horde of knights, which you'll need to tackle the bosses that pop up every 20 levels. You'll need all your fingers to launch them in a group before the guardian puts up a barrier, before leaping off screen and slamming down, taking huge chunks off the clock.

With practice, you'll amass enough time and firepower in advance to finish them off before they can launch too many attacks, and to comfortably withstand the ones they do land. But as the levels rise, miracles are harder to come by. Brushes that sweep the red from marked tiles require a few taps to remove; you'll need plenty more to pluck out giant asparagus. Giggling onion-eaters roll around the edges of the board, helping you fill specific squares but turning nasty if you ignore them. And then you have unruly guests throwing objects from upstairs windows; to protect your patch, you'll need to hold your finger down to open a parasol and bounce the missiles clear. Well, *obviously*.

There's a familiar sense of escalation, whereby the visual noise steadily increases until you find you're playing on instinct, your fingers somehow making sense of the chaos when it all becomes too much for your eyes to take in. In that regard, it's not much of a stretch to suggest that if Jeff Minter went to Japan and made a puzzle game, it might look something like this. There aren't many bigger compliments we could pay to this endearingly odd, memorable little game.

8

Developer/publisher Onion Games KK
Format Android, iOS (both tested)
Release Out now

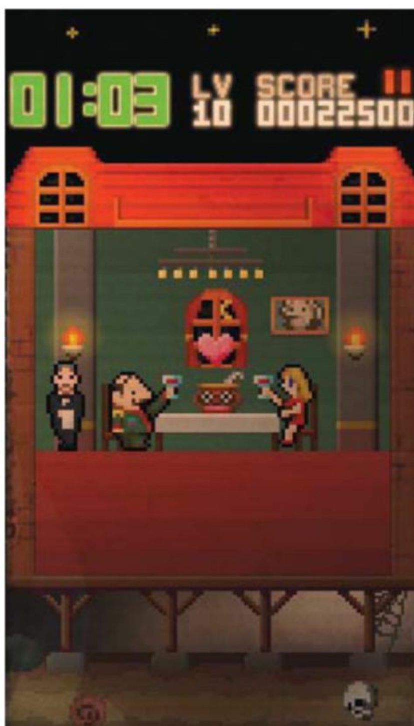


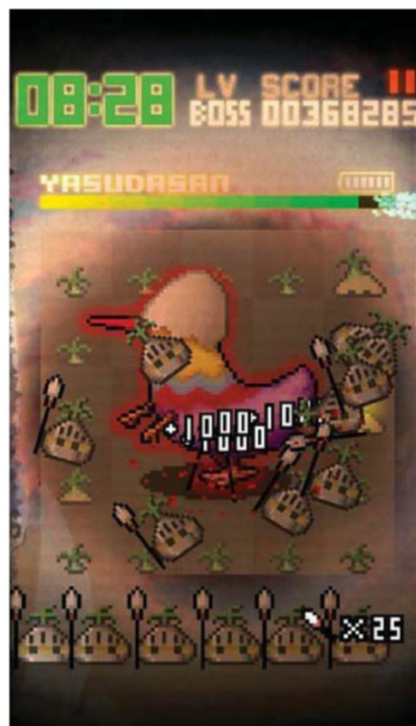
GRAND BOUDOIR PEST HOTEL

Short skits every 10 levels give some semblance of an explanation for the ongoing lunacy, as do collectible cards you'll earn through various accomplishments. Situated in the middle of two warring factions, the Onion Hotel soon becomes a hotbed of lust and violent conflict. It's all played for dark laughs – though perhaps, in the current climate, the sight of a pot-bellied older man leaping into bed with a younger woman is unfortunate.

For a game whose longevity lies in chasing high scores, luck has a big role to play – though adaptable players will ensure they have alternative ways to complete doubles when onions and enemies aren't kindly positioned









Dragon Age: Inquisition

Three years on, BioWare's biggest Dragon Age is a work of glorious and slightly tragic excess

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

Developer BioWare **Publisher** EA **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

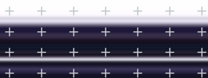
Running a country is, we're sure, a messy, awkward business and so, much of the time, is *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Consider Skyhold, the game's gradually restored mountaintop fortress that is the most obvious manifestation of your power as Inquisitor, but which often inspires a sense of helplessness, with companions, crafting stations, merchants, furnaces, wardrobes and gardens scattered throughout its courtyards and battlements. A hundred hours into the game, it is still possible to get lost while walking around your own seat of government – confusing the door to your quarters with the one to the war room, for example, or the stair to the great hall balcony with the one to your aviary. The perks of lording it over Skyhold aren't a huge departure from commanding the Normandy in the *Mass Effect* series, but *Inquisition* drags out the distances and piles on the pomp. If you want to acquire new armour before setting out on a mission, you'll need to dismiss your advisors and slog back down the hall to the undercroft, then call another meeting at your war table. There is, perhaps, an object lesson here about the narcissism of tyranny, about being engulfed by the trappings of megalomania.

Next to the imposing scale and liveliness of this space, with its laden banquet tables and multitude of cobwebbed, candelit nooks and crannies, the Inquisitor her or himself is quite the non-entity. This is often true of BioWare's 'blank tablet' protagonists, each stretched thin by the demands of morality gauges and multiple-choice dialogue systems, and in this case, there's a little more method to the blandness. Your character is appointed Inquisitor, an ancient role invoked during times of crisis, following a cataclysm which at once helpfully kills off the realm's previous spiritual head, wipes your memory and endows you with a unique mark that can be used to seal portals to the Fade, *Dragon Age*'s parallel magical dimension. As far as Chosen One CVs go they don't come much more by the numbers, but *Inquisition* turns this anodyne framework into a strength by, in essence, making you the mirror for an entire society.

Rulers exist to an extent in the eye of the beholder, and in *Dragon Age*'s complex multiracial universe, the Inquisitor is an inspiration to some and a blight to others – a tyrant, a bulwark, a money-making opportunity, a heretic, a sex object and countless things besides. The thrill of exploring this world, with its oddly Francophone courts, oppressed mage circles, paranoid knightly orders and brutalised elven enclaves, is drawing out its many different interpretations of who you are. Or at least, should be. The *Mass Effect* series conjures up a similar play of your preconceptions, but *Inquisition*'s universe has a rather more involved history, its conversations arising from a thick mulch of ballads, scripture, family trees, race mythologies and clashing accounts of certain famous events, including those of previous games. All this endows even minor cosmetic choices, such as deciding which nation's drapes to hang in the throne room, with unexpected dramatic force, and stops you from losing interest as you tour environments that occasionally threaten to devolve into mountains of busywork.

Similar things can be said of *Inquisition*'s main questline, which sees you racing to stop a demon warlord re-entering the Fade and so bringing about the end of the world. As with much of BioWare's output, this banal tale's redeeming virtue is that it creates a charged atmosphere in which smaller and more evocative incidents can play out – companion character arcs, the resolution of long-held grievances between factions such as mages and templars, the discovery of lost loved ones and the revelation of forgotten disasters.

It also benefits from the maturation of BioWare's dialogue writing, which is less reliant here on intrusive clarificatory measures like emoticons or colour-coding. *Inquisition* represents a developer that has grown confident enough in the delicacy of its phrasing (though possibly not its often hilarious character animations) to do without such crutches – or, at least, to ambiguate them. Companions do register their opinions as 'approval' or 'disapproval' captions, but there are no loyalty bars to fall back on, so you must work out where precisely you stand from the wording ▶





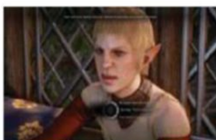
The occasional gap in BioWare games between dialogue options as presented and what your character actually says has attracted criticism, but that slight degree of uncertainty can be thrilling

alone. The old dialogue wheel returns, with kindly, neutral or careless and aggressive responses arranged from top to bottom, but for every conversation that pans out along one of those familiar axes, there's a chat that escapes easy categorisation.

Your companions themselves are among BioWare's most intelligent, and difficult, creations – perhaps the greatest compliment you can pay the writing team is that some of them get away with being actively unlikeable. The warrior cleric Cassandra is one of the easiest to read, all flinty righteousness and obstinacy in the face of death and small talk alike, a persona that supports a combat style built around tanking and rallying allies, and which predictably has its softer side. Derbyshire-accented Sera comes across as the usual oddball, mildly sociopathic, raunchy elven rogue, but there is a peculiar agitation at the core of the character, a barely restrained hatred of all hint of status or political manoeuvring. She's often among the most carefree companions, but as a member of the ruling caste, you're never quite sure of her feelings. Likewise Solas, an alternately pleasant and forbidding scholar who responds well to an inquiring mind, and who slowly completes a mural of your feats at Skyhold as the adventure unfolds. Perhaps the strangest of all is Cole, a troubled, gifted soul who is acutely conscious of traumas others keep hidden yet often at a loss to make sense of what they do or say. Each personality also sheds light on the others: changing up party in the field is, strictly speaking, unnecessary, as characters gain XP when not in use, but worth doing for the sake of the jokes, philosophical discussions and slanging matches you'll overhear when odd bedfellows are thrown together.

If these characters mesmerise in conversation, they don't always chime in other respects. *Inquisition* offers a broad range of class skill trees, but characters slop together a little dissatisfyingly. You will have at least two rogues, three mages and three melee damage-dealers or tanks to choose from, and it can be a headache to distinguish their contributions, at least until you unlock each companion's unique skill tree. The combat itself continues the theme, with a camera that doesn't pull out far enough for easy party management, and a cursor that hitches annoyingly on the scenery. The pathfinding is also patchy, especially when moving around larger opponents, though this is made up for by the ability to freeze time in order to lay down waypoints, and select which abilities your allies should favour or avoid in advance. While light on transformative mechanics, *Inquisition*'s lavish spellbook includes some feisty terrain control options. Delve into the Reaver skilltree and you can generate a ring of pain around your character, inflaming the ire of your enemies while boosting the damage you do to them.

THERE IS A QUEST THAT EXPLORES THE HORRIBLE SUBJECT OF HOMOSEXUAL 'CONVERSION THERAPY'



Classic BioWare character alignments such as 'lawful' or 'true neutral' are just visible beneath *Inquisition*'s surface



A NEW ROADMAP

Brought to life with the Frostbite engine, *Inquisition*'s enormous maps take some inspiration from *Skyrim*, with an extravagant to-do list to whittle down on your way to story objectives. This strains both patience and credulity – unlike in rival *The Witcher 3*, where you do in fact play a mercenary oddjobsman, the Inquisitor finding time to chase down lost cattle feels like a betrayal of the premise. The game's landscapes are a pleasure to roam, however. One mission sees you earning favour at court in order to extend the time you can spend away from the party exploring the palace's underbelly. Another late-game quest takes you to the Hissing Wastes, a region which is pointedly devoid of open world distractions.



On the easiest difficulty, *Inquisition* can be treated as a rather lumbering action game. On normal and above, you'll need to open the tactical view to fine-tune your party's antics



A few characters from previous games reappear, including blond heart-throb Cullen, but *Inquisition* handles its inheritance deftly

Opt for storm magic and you can summon a thundercloud which paralyses any foe that leaves its area of effect.

BioWare has a reputation for engaging with discussions about representation, race, gender and sexual orientation in its games, and *Inquisition* is an especially searching example. There is the opportunity to ask a character about his gender identity, a conversation that is all the more powerful for the game's allowing you to say things that are truly crass. There is a quest that explores the horrible subject of homosexual 'conversion therapy', disguised as a more plodding RPG conceit about reuniting estranged family members. These moments of insight are, alas, matched with moments of great clumsiness: the treatment of elves as a catch-all motif for the oppressed and stateless, for instance, and the resurgence of Semitic stereotypes in the characterisation of dwarves as artisans and merchants.

The question, right now, is when or indeed, whether that journey will continue. The commercial failure of *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, a game that is broadly *Inquisition* in space with half the charm, appears to have wrought a change of priorities at BioWare and EA. A fourth *Dragon Age* is underway, but the departure of veteran writer David Gaider and *Inquisition*'s creative director Mike Laidlaw suggests that EA is taking the series and *Mass Effect* back to formula. Much of the blame for these reversals can be pinned on *Andromeda*'s muddled writing, tepid world and astonishing quantity of bugs, but the larger problem may simply be that projects as titanic and dense as this are too fiddly to engineer for too modest a return. The elephant in the room is BioWare's new IP *Anthem*, an online service shooter that plainly covets the mantle of Bungie's *Destiny*. *Inquisition* launched with an online PvE mode, albeit a forgettable one, and you could argue that a world as storied as this would shine with a social space, where fans of the lore could untangle backstory threads together. This hardly seems essential, however, when you consider how much the game achieves with age-old concepts, and how much remains to be done in terms of both the writing and the combat. If this does prove to be among the last of BioWare's traditional singleplayer epics, it represents a castle left unfinished. ■

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Arms

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch **Release** 2017

What a shame it would be were *Arms* to be remembered as the most high-profile victim of Nintendo's comeback. Even before its first 12 months is up, Switch has had an exceptional debut year, but after the fallow years of Wii U, its comparatively packed release schedule has had an unfortunate impact on the *Mario Kart* team's exuberant brawler. Six months on, the lobbies of its wonderfully accessible Party Match mode are notably less populous, and waits for Ranked battles are growing. In a climate where even high-profile fighting games such as *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite* are struggling, *Arms'* million-plus sales record isn't to be sniffed at. Even so, it's becoming clear that *Splatoon*'s breakout success isn't going to be replicated here.

It's tempting to say it's just bad timing. At its heart, *Arms* remains irresistibly good fun: colourful, immediate and rich in character, it brings a cheery approachability to a genre that's grown increasingly impenetrable to the masses. And over the course of half a year, Nintendo has built upon it with a series of additions that, on paper, seem shrewd enough. In the puffed-chest showmanship of Max Brass and clownish acrobatics of Lola Pop, it has two memorable new entrants; the latest, Misango, is equally distinctive, with poison-tipped scorpions and a spirit ally making him the game's most versatile fighter. Meanwhile, a robotic version of cover star Spring Man presents a good reason to revisit the singleplayer Grand Prix, popping up to offer a stern challenge to players who haven't suffered a loss en route to the final.

With hindsight, other additions might have been too little, too late. Extra training exercises make for a more comprehensive tutorial, and arguably should have been there from the start. Likewise, the welcome ability to remap inputs, which might have persuaded some to persevere with the more versatile motion controls. Badges for a range of accomplishments provide the kind of hook *Arms* lacks beyond the pleasure of simply playing it. But a small picture next to your player icon hardly feels like you're wearing your achievements with pride.

We've not played almost 200 hours of the thing without good reason, but these days most players want something more to keep them coming back. *Splatoon 2* has benefitted from the breathing space the original was given on Wii U to build an audience, that previous-gen groundwork allowing Nintendo to maintain more regular updates, with old maps and weapons repurposed for the sequel. *Arms'* progress, inevitably, has been rather slower – and with no metagame to speak of, it's struggling to compete with its publisher's other big online game. The Splatfest-like Party Crash event may yet generate a spike of interest; otherwise, one of our favourite Switch games is beginning to look all punched out. ■

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